

DARK WATERS
(Novel)

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Prologue

IT escaped my notice when the bat-laden evening, rising from the bank of the Indra and pausing over the mango grove, stole into our *mohalla*. I was standing at the door of my house waiting for my Younger Aunt.

All evenings are more or less alike. But sometimes, soft waves of ennui, drifting down with the dusk upon invisible wings of haze, make the evening look different. It makes you feel so languid that you like to do nothing but gaze into space but gaze and let time pass by.

I, however, find that this evening is very much like all the ones last year.

The same houses, the same dusty road. And across the road one sees the same washermen and carpenters sitting in their crumbling houses and their naked, skinny children

blubbering ceaselessly. The goldsmith-cum-vaid's young wife still stands at the gate of her big house, hungrily staring at the passers-by and then coyly stepping back. In the house next to hers, one still sees the widow of Shiv Prashad, sitting sad-eyed on her threshold with outstretched legs and listlessly watching the scene around. Young boys who have just stepped into adolescence are still seen hanging around the small bridge and as on other days the breeze laden with stench still rises from the weed infested dark waters of the Moti Talab. Beyond the mango one can see young and old women carrying water in brass pitchers and indulging in badinage on their way home.

An old ruin stands brooding over the whole scene. Ancient but still in shape, it stands thrusting against my own house and watches everything with unseeing eyes. Long before coming to this *mohalla*, when I was still a child, I had been seeing this ruin in the same state—even when the old town took on a new shape years ago, it remained unchanged. Not to talk of the years gone by of which I know nothing, even today it stands like an oddity in our *mohalla*. It looks grotesque—thick walls like those of an old fortress and big portals of similar size, ugly ungainly windows with wooden bars a foot thick notched into the walls. For years it was the breeding place of snakes and scorpions and the haunt of ghosts. Its owner never cared; he just allowed it to run to rot. But his sons, being more business-minded, tried to improve it without his knowledge. They wanted to make it habitable and put it out on rent. But as soon as the father got wind of it, he had its doors blocked with bricks so that the house now looked more grotesque than before—and of no use to anybody. It was neither fit for being lived in nor deserving the epithet of a ruin. It refused to crumble down or come up in the form of a new building.

On all days in that stubborn ruin, crickets trilled ceaselessly, with other insects, known and unknown, adding to the cacophony. It made the silence of the *mohalla* more eerie and pronounced.

What struck a note of change in the *mohalla* was the motor garage, which being new, stood out from its surroundings. Instead of the usual 25 watt bulb, a blindingly bright one shone over the garage signboard which prominently displayed its proprietor's name and his phone number. Over the garage entrance

hung a garland of tiny bulbs kept winking all night. On top of the walls flanking the garage a row of lighted candles fought to dispel the darkness of the mango grove.

The garage however presents a different picture on the days. . . .

Every fifth or seventh minute a fully-loaded diesel truck leaves while three or four trucks stand behind, waiting their turn. In the dry season, before the start of the rains, they spread three or four cots on the vacant lot in front of the garage where hefty Sikhs, with intoxicated eyes peeping out of thick layers of fat, and scraggy Muslim truck drivers and cleaners, grain merchants and one or two Inspectors of the Food Department and their friends pass the evening in hilarious backchat which continues late into the night. Outside the garage, they turn on the radio full blast. Starting at five in the morning with Pakistani programmes it goes on to Radio Ceylon and continues without respite till eleven at night when Ceylon goes off the air. Catcalls and guffaws of laughter and clapping accompany the film songs to the full-throated applause of '*Jeetay raho badshaho!*' making splashes in the placid waters of Moti Talab and disturbing the peace of the *mohalla*.

Then the dogs sleeping in the darkness of the mango grove take to barking, drowning the sound of the water tap gushing out into the pots and pails kept under it to be filled. Rippling through the silence comes the screech of a water fowl as it flies over Moti Talab. As if taking a cue from the screech of the water fowl, the bats hanging from the branches of the palms and wild fig trees, start screeching in unison, noisily breaching the stillness of the night. In the dhobi's one-room tenement a child whimpers in his mother's lap. The goldsmith-cum-vaid coughs wheezily to expel the phlegm from his hollow chest. And in a nearby house, Nandan's mother half of whose body is paralysed, groans while turning on her side, "Hey Ram!"

Then the silence is stretched out from here to there. The ripples of noise subside, like ripples of water subsiding and restoring the surface of the water to its original placid state. The road leading to the cinema house lies quiet with bated breath. It comes to life only when the boots of the stray policeman on his nightly beat heavily tread on it or won the sound a whistle vibrates in the air. Sometimes the road watches cheap

women pass by the cinema house, huddled together, their tittering breaking into bawdy laughter and then getting lost in the air. But the dogs in the mango grove persist all night with their barking. What else has the *mohalla* to boast of?

But no. It had its garage. A new one. Its walls smoothly plastered, the whole place looking clean, bereft of din or clamour or echoes of vulgar laughter. And so dazzlingly bright...Its face—lift reminded one of a truck driver who sinned throughout the year but put on new clothes on Idd Day, dabbed on scent, darkened his eyes with collyrium, and covering his head with a new cap, respectfully sat down with the congregation in the courtyard where *namaz* was being said.

Qasim Bhai emerged from the garage. There was no cap on his head. Instead he had covered his head with a handkerchief, its ends tucked behind his ears. The candles fixed on the walls had gone out in the breeze. Standing on a stool he started lighting up the candles.

In the afternoon two days ago, I was standing at my door in this very house, the same children playing in front. The same goldsmith's young wife, the same mango grove and the sunlight coming from the direction of Moti Talab filtering through the foliage. There was also the same devouring desolation laying the ground behind the deserted well an arid waste.

The sun shone brightly. The cots which generally stayed in the vacant lot had been pulled into the shade alongside the wall. There was no truck standing in front of the garage nor any flurry of activity marking the approach of the evening. But one could see two tall and hefty Sikhs strolling in the verandah. They presently came down and sat on the cots facing each other. Inside, one could hear Qasim Bhai bellowing into the telephone...Hello, hello! Yes, yes...

Just then they saw the goldsmith's wife carrying a pitcher of water on her head, coming from the direction of the well. Her wide red-bordered sari billowed a little, her steps slowed down as she neared the garage. So that she should not have any difficulty in walking with the load on her head she had pulled up her sari to her calves and tucked into the fold at the waist on her left. Even so she walked with a lurching gait, erratically planting one foot before the other and spilling water over her face and bosom. As she passed by the cots, her steps slowed

down still further and she had to stop momentarily to balance the pitcher on her head from which more water had spilled over, drenching the front portion of her blouse.

Although I was standing at some distance from her I had discerned a faint smile on her face; it flickered on her wet cheeks and was gone.

The less corpulent of the two sardar had shifted on his haunches on the cot to look in her direction, his hungry eyes embedded in the woman's wet bosom like an arrow. He would have continued to stare at her but for his companion who distracted his attention. "What's the matter, Sardarji?" he said jestingly thumping his thigh.

Call it coincidence, the goldsmith-cum-vaid came out of the gate just then to blow his nose. He stopped to take in the scene with a studied stare, his eyes flitting over the sardars sitting on the cots. Then his eyes followed his wife as she proceeded towards her house. Casting a cursory glance at me, he retraced his steps and disappeared into his house without saying a word to anyone.

That night after the main gate of their house had closed we heard them squabbling which continued far into the night. Conscious of their self-respect, they tried to keep their voices low. But sometimes anger would get the better of them and one could clearly hear the woman's rising voice even from across the road, "So you want me to sit behind purdah?" she cried again and again. "Then lock me up in the house. Is it a sin to step out of the house? You won't let me live nor let me die!"

"Him!" I could visualise the goldsmith angrily throwing about his hands in the air. "Am I trying you in a cauldron of oil? Do you take yourself for a Sati Savitri? Is it you or I who stands at the door all day ogling young boys? How dare you tell lies, you slut? Don't I know, you go to the door ten times a day to give your lovers the glad eye. You can't throw dust in my eyes oh, no, not you! You think you are the only woman in the world in the bloom of youth. You walk throwing your bosom out. *Sali*, I warn you. One day I'm going to cut out those milk pots of yours and fling them out. Yes, there'll be neither bamboo nor flute, understand?"

Then followed the sounds of a scuffle. "What's stopping

you from cutting them off?" they heard her saying, "Here, cut them off! Let me see the man you are!"

There was the sound of blows raining on her back. They were again fighting. "Finish me off! It will bring me liberation from a devil like you. *Harami*, when you lacked manhood why did you take it into your head to marry me? You sinner! You assassin!"

Suddenly the goldsmith's wife's voice trailed off into silence as if her husband had gagged her mouth. Then a loud outcry went reverberating through the *mohalla* "*Oh, maago! Oh, maago!*"

The people of the *mohalla* were curious. Two women banged on the door, asking the inmates to come out. But the wailing did not stop nor did the door open. Some people then jumped over the back wall into the courtyard.

The goldsmith's wife was lying naked on the unpaved floor of the courtyard while her husband was sitting astride her. He was beating her below her navel with his small goldsmith's hammer. He kept gnashing his teeth and abusing her filthily as if he was out to drive his lesson home. He kept punctuating his obscenities with, "Speak! Speak up!"

As the hammer blows fell on her bone she writhed in pain and struggled to extricate herself from his clutches, throwing out her arms and legs and abusing him in return. "*Oh, maago!*" she sought goddess Kali's help with every abuse.

The goldsmith glared at the intruders. "What are you doing here? What are you doing here?" he hollered like one gone mad.

Leaving his wife lying on the ground he faced the intruders. "So you have come to watch the fun"? he fumed, his eyes burning with rage. "What's it you are seeing here? Go and see your mothers. Go and see your daughters."

Freed of her husband, the woman's eyes travelled to the neighbours standing around her, some of them known faces, others unknown. Then sitting up with alacrity, she drew in her legs and looked down as if she had withdrawn into herself. Feeling embarrassed at her nakedness she raised her head and looked around as if seeking a shelter. The inner door was closed and the kitchen was at some distance from where she sat. She was in a quandary: she could neither stay there nor walk away.

At last she changed her stance and sat down limply with her legs drawn up against her bosom and her head between her knees, her hair falling over her shoulders. At last she burst out crying.

The people went away without uttering a word. But the next morning the goldsmith came in for serious castigation at the hands of the residents of the *mohalla*. Men turned away their faces at the sight of him and the women wiggled their fingers at him, predicting that the old man was bound to die a painful death, most likely as a leper. "Why don't such rotters kick the bucket early in life? Just imagine taking to wife a girl young enough to be his daughter! . . .

Qasim Bhai climbed down from his stool. All the candles were now burning brightly in a row on the wall, the glare of the multi-coloured electric bulbs mingling with the individual pin-point lights of the candles while Qasim Bhai stood there admiring the scene with proud satisfaction. His handkerchief slipped from his head, making it bare. Looking a little bored, he tied knots in the handkerchief and disappeared into the garage.

Emerging from the garage after a short while, he stopped near the door to give some instructions to his servant and then came onto the road. Looking at his 'kerchief' covered head I thought that he was going to say his *fateha*. Today was Shab-e-barat and the wandering souls must be lingering at the doors, waiting for him.

I anxiously scanned the road leading from Junior Aunt's house. There was no sign of her though she had told me that she would be with me around this time.

For the past two years Abba had been conducting the *fateha* for Junior Aunt at her place but this year, in his absence, this task had devolved on me. Junior Aunt had herself come to remind me to be in readiness and that she would send me word as soon as her arrangements were complete, adding by way of extra caution that I should finish all my chores betimes. We had a large family and it took almost an hour to say the Shab-e-barat *fateha*. This time, however, I had deleted some names from the list without telling mother and had thus managed to finish the job in half the time and was now waiting for Junior Aunt.

"Babba, when are you leaving for Junior Aunt's house?" Mother asked me, opening the verandah door.

"Amma, I'm just waiting to go," I replied, my eyes gliding over the road. "It's already late and still there's no message from her."

"What kind of message?" she said. "Must you go only when she comes to fetch you? Why don't you yourself go and find out what's causing the delay?"

The fact is that except for special occasions such as Idd and other festivals I rarely visit Junior Aunt. It's not that I avoid visiting her just like that. There are other reasons which Mother is not aware of. For instance, what's the point in going there much ahead of time? Go one must, of course. But won't Junior Aunt feel embarrassed if I dropped in when things were not ready? I know she has to scrape and scrounge to complete the arrangements. Poverty can indeed be a curse, making everything look dismal. She may also get the idea that primarily I was not keen to visit her and when that time did come, I was in a hurry to leave.

"I see someone coming," Mother peered into the distance. "Is it Rubina?"

Yes, there was someone walking gingerly along the edge of the road. We strained our eyes in an effort to recognise the person.

"Who? Rubina?" Mother at last called out to the person.

Yes, it was Rubina. Adjusting the *pallav* of her *orhni* she stopped at the door. "Bhaijan!" she said in a faint voice.

Its headlight blazing, a truck stopped near the garage though its engine kept coughing for a few minutes.

We came onto the road, Rubina following me. Rubina is my cousin and visits our house quite often. Sometimes I can behave in an inexplicable manner. Ever since returning home after completing my education, I have been rather formal with her, at best exchanging a few casual remarks. My reserve must have put her off for she stopped trying to talk to me, much less visit me. She would come when it was imperative to do so. I felt I was the guilty one for creating a gulf between cousins. Poverty can create a gulf between persons. In wonder what Rubina thought of me.

I had forged ahead of Rubina and waited for her to catch

up with me. This also gave me an opportunity to have a close look at her. I got a jolt. Rubina had really grown out of her girlhood. Why had this fact escaped my notice? I recalled what Mother had once said about her—that she had shot up like a palm and yet she was devoid of any manners. She had given up her studies a long time back and now all she did was to sit at home and harass her mother and sister-in-law. And what uncouth ways she had! Life had always given Junior Aunt a raw deal. As I had seen the dice was always loaded against her. God only knows what was in store for this wayward girl.

“Ruby!” I thought of asking her when she came up. “Why did you come to fetch me? You could have as well sent some errand boy instead.” I wanted to ask her in a most cordial manner. But I could not bring myself to utter these words.

It was a fact that of late rowdyism had greatly increased in our *mohalla*. At the best of times one is ready to take liberties with a girl with no protective hand over her head. And this was true of the rowdies in our *mohalla*.

Rasul Munshi's house was ablaze with rows of candles burning on the walls. His small daughters, clad in nylon frocks and *orhnis* were frolicking about on the plinth in front of their house. Rasul Mian's eldest daughter had discarded purdah, taken up a social worker's job and was often seen going about in a government jeep. She was standing against the flap of her door, looking out. As her gaze fell on us, she studies us for a moment and then withdrew behind the door.

The observance of purdah in this manner reminded me of a wedding party.

The house was bursting at the seams with wedding guests. There was an abundance of children who ran all over the house, making an ear-splitting noise. Women had gathered in the rear courtyard and true to the adage that there is no purdah under the green canopy, all sorts of men were coming in and going out, exchanging glances with the women sitting there, irrespective of whether they were young or not so young, married or unmarried....

Sitting on a mat in a corner of the courtyard Junior Aunt was peeling garlic for the night's dinner. Sagarwali bahu was sitting by her side, a smile frozen on her paan-stained lips.

At some distance from them Mumani was bending over a

cooking pot on a *chulha*. She muttered as she stirred the contents of the pot with a ladle. At a gesture from Mumani, Junior Aunt went up to her. They stood there talking in whispers. Then Junior Aunt went out with tearful eyes and did not return to the courtyard.

Subsequently, it was learnt from Sagarwali bahu that Mumani had expressed her displeasure at Rubani's ways and had taunted Junior Aunt that she allowed her to roam all over the *mohalla* without let or hindrance. The girl, Mumani complained, refused to visit her house on the plea that she observed *purdah* while she thought nothing of standing at a shop for an hour on the pretext of buying something and rubbing shoulders with young boys . .

Suddenly a sharp, unpleasant smell assailed my nostrils and I stopped in my tracks.

"It's the pond ahead," Rubani said, forestalling my question. "Always this stench rises from it."

It was a mixed smell of rotting weeds and water reeking of fish. I guessed Younger Aunt's house was not far from the pond.

Not that Moti Talab made its presence felt only at night ; it kept company with the people of the *mohalla* and particularly Younger Aunt round the clock. Although some distance separated it from Aunt's house one end of it seemed to lap the compound of her house. At its other end there was a mouldy looking mango grove and a heap of earth rising on the bank of the pond. Being highly polluted and infested with leeches the pond was of no use to the people.

"Be careful, Bhaijan!" Rubani raised the end of her *salwar* and led the way. Passing along a verandah through a narrow corridor and a dark room, we came to the main section of the house. At the end of its courtyard there was a structure resembling an outhouse. It had two rooms. Aunt lived in one of them and the other served as a kitchen.

Aunt looked at us from across the railing and rose to her feet. She did not address me. Perhaps the very act of getting up had served as a gesture of welcome. I wished her and sat down on a mat, waiting for her to make an overture to me.

A lantern was burning at the kitchen door, its chimney black with soot. Perhaps Bhabi was not inside. A little away from

the lantern, a portion of the ground had been marked off in a circle and sanctified by plastering it with white lime. All the things for the *fateha* rested within the circle.

"Aunt, where's Bhabi ?" I asked Junior Aunt, looking towards the kitchen.

Aunt hesitated for a moment and then said, "Must be in her room."

Bhabi had not been keeping well for the past few weeks. She was eight months gone. Her face, hands and legs, in fact, all her body had swollen and she hardly ate any food. Mohsin always looked morose and dejected and gave the impression that he was unconcerned with what was going on in the house.

"Is Mohsin not at home ?"

"Who ?" For an instant Aunt put on a lost look. "Oh, him?" she said recovering quickly. "He hardly ever stays in the house. He leaves early in the morning and does not show up even for lunch. I wish I knew what he does and where he eats. His wife tells me that he returns at about eleven and goes straight to bed."

"Has he been able to get a job ?"

"That's the whole trouble," Junior Aunt said. "I don't know what's in his mind. For a long time he kept me in hope and now he tries to avoid me. Let him, if that's how he feels about it. I'm not here to suffer for everyone. I have to manage these snivelling brats, hear the neighbour's taunts, suffer their odium. Tell me, is it at my behest that he goes about jobless ? Have I taught him to neglect his children ? But who cares ? Oh, yes, I tell them, I love to starve myself..."

A child came and stood against the railing and handed Junior Aunt a packet. It was benzoin. "I had forgotten to get the benzoin. Son, if you have done your ablutions let's go and be finished."

I followed Aunt into the kitchen. She sat down on a wooden plank in front of the *chulha* and I sat down near the sanctified ground. Picking up a big plate, she arranged *halwa* and chapatis on it. Rubina came in and sat down by her side.

It was a fact that Junior Aunt came in for blame for everything. Even though she managed to tide over situations Mohsin still went about looking harried and lost as if Junior Aunt was not his mother and was responsible for everything that went

wrong.

"You know it, of course," Aunt said. "He had quite a nice job. But he gave it up and now he runs about all over the place looking for one. If he had had any feelings for the family he would not have behaved in such ill-considered manner. But why blame anyone? It's all in one's luck." Aunt sighed deeply and looked at Rubani. "*Beti*, if the woods are kindled fill the brazier."

It is Shab-e-qadar—a night devoted to worship and prayer. A precious time to seek atonement for one's sins. A time when the portals of Heaven open and when one night's prayer is equal to four hundred years of worship.

It would be a sin even to speculate on how Junior Aunt managed to assemble all this paraphernalia for the *fateha* when her resources were so meagre even to scrap up two meals a day. I thought the Almighty who looks after the whole world had not forgotten Junior Aunt in her hour of need and had provided her the wherewithals to observe the rites with proper dignity.

When the brazier was brought in, Junior Aunt fished out an old list from an old box. The list contained the names of all the relatives from the beginning upto the present times that had passed into the limbo of death. All the names were there, written on old parchment in faded ink in Junior Aunt's own handwriting. All those who once upon a time belonged to Junior Aunt's family and had now closed their eyes for ever.

True to the hallowed custom coming down from ages I imagined that the souls of those people would be haunting the nooks and corners of this house, waiting for the *fateha*. But Mohsin who was to offer benzoin in their names was absent from home even on Shab-e-baraat.

PART ONE

The Turn of the Tide

THE articles required for the *fateha* ceremony lay neatly arranged on a round clearing of the floor, specially white-washed and sanctified for the purpose. There was a glass tumbler brimming with water. By it was a small pot containing sandal paste with rose petals stuck into it. An incense burner holding some dying embers stood next to it. Some powdered benzoin lay on a sheet of paper. And right in the middle of it all, were lighted joss sticks wafting their perfume in the air.

Junior Aunt put two *chapatis* and some *halwa* in an enameled plate and pushed it towards me to begin the *fateha*. I picked up the list of names and ran my eyes over it. Mirza Karamat Baig's name headed the list.

Nobody could recall the years. It must have been years ago when Mirza Karamat Baig came to Bastar as a Police Inspector, locally called the *Daroga*.

He served there for about three years. It was a job in a native state and the times were easy. One could get one and a half maunds of rice for a rupee and a similar quantity of wheat at the same price. Ghee sold at ten seers a rupee. And there was no need to spend money on birds or mutton. The Raja was the overlord of the State but it was in fact the Police Inspector who ruled the roost at the village level. Mirza liked Bastar and would not think of leaving the place. He had taken such a great fancy for the place that when his orders of transfer came he renounced his job and stayed back. A bachelor, he was free from a liabilities. Although over thirty, as far as people knew no woman had come into his life. Tall and hefty, wheatish complexion, thick, well-trimmed moustache stretching on an impressive face—they all combined to give him an imposing look. On being removed from the seat of authority a man ceases to count as a somebody and recedes into the background. But not Mirza. Even though on relinquishing his job he took to the humble work of trading in glass bangles he still retained his imposing ways.

After giving up such a handsome job how did he reconcile himself to selling feminine gee-gaws? Well, there were many stories current about it.

One of them was...

Mirza was in the habit of going out for an early morning walk while it was still dark. Being in the police this habit came in the way of his routine, official duties, one of them being the morning parade. He was required to report for parade, decked out in stiffly starched uniform, heavy Sam Browne and everything.

The morning walk had become such a compulsion with him that his interest in the police job gradually waned. At last he took two month's leave which he mostly spent at home.

It was winter time, the morning so thick with fog that he could see nothing beyond his nose. But that did not dampen Mirza's spirits. He would pick up his walking stick, and setting out from home while it was still dark, would make deep in roads into the countryside.

In those days Bastar was not what it is now. And as for Jagdalpur, it was more like a village than a town, boasting of one solitary road which took off from the Rajmahal and ended in the bazaar. There were only one or two pucca brick houses, the rest being hovel-like affairs. The jungle had almost encroached upon the town and at night it was not uncommon to see tigers and leopards prowling over the place.

Once every week or so Mirza would narrate with gusto his romantic encounter with a leopard or a tiger in the course of his morning walk. He would say that in the dark he had mistaken the brute for a dog and chased it away. Or that while digging a big trench near the foot of the hill he had suddenly come upon a bear. He was not concerned whether the people believed him or not. He would blithely tell them that he had seen a pair of two-headed pythons—they could as well be cobras—locked in embrace, not once but twice.

"It must be a dangerous place!" one of his audience would exclaim in mock seriousness.

"Of course, it's a dangerous place," Mirza would agree with him. "But what can I do? I can't change my habit just because of the lurking danger."

Mirza's neighbours, living in government quarters listened to his escapades with great interest. They took him for a man of great prowess, except for a Pandit who lived in a house opposite his own. Whenever Mirza started on one of his stories he would start looking the other way to hide the hint of smile on his face. "Mirza, I also go out for a morning walk," he would say. "But I don't come across any tiger or bear. Which fields do you pass through? One day I'll accompany you and waylay that wretched tiger."

Mirza would refuse to be drawn out. He would just give him a knowing smile. But as soon as the Pandit was gone he would say, "You know, Pandit is jealous of me. I used to buy milk from him. But then he started diluting it with water and I stopped buying from him. *Atre*, see what the times have come to! One can't afford to be outspoken. *Bhai*, sell me pure milk and I'll not go to another man. It is as simple as that. I've to shell out money in any case have'nt I?"

Mirza's leave was coming to an end when a scandalous rumour about him went round the town.

Like other days, Mirza had gone out on his morning walk when he ran into the Pandit. Something untoward must have happened for he returned home looking crest-fallen. The day had just started and people had come out of their houses for their morning ablutions. On his walks Mirza was always in high spirits, looking cheerful and bright. He would toss greetings to the passers-by, scold the slothful for sleeping overtime, drive home his point by reciting a couplet which underlined the importance of early rising and brought out the benefits of a morning walk.

But that morning he avoided looking at anyone, not to talk of greeting the morning strollers. He just stole into his house with down-cast eyes and bolted the door from within. He did not come out for the rest of the day.

After entrusting his cows to the cattle-grazer Pandit was sitting on the plinth of his house.

"What's happened?" he laughed, striking his *lathi* on the ground to attract attention. "I don't see Mirza around. Where's he? *Bhai*, will someone call him out and ask him to join us here? Do you know, this morning I chanced upon his leopard? Bulaki, O, Bulaki, would you like to see the leopard?"

Bulaki was a callow youth whom Pandit generally made the butt of his jokes. He smiled at Pandit's remark drawing the attention of more people.

"Pandit, are you sure it was a leopard? What did it look like? Didn't you get scared?"

Pandit thumped Bulaki's back. "Son, a most beautiful leopard, if ever there was one! It will make your heart go pit-a-pat."

Pandit paused for a moment to watch the reaction on the onlookers' faces. Then he glanced at Mirza's closed door and said in a loud voice, "It's surprising that I should have missed the whole thing all these days. But today as I saw him coming out of his house I followed him at a safe distance. The morning was thick with fog and so Mirza was not aware that I was following him. After walking some distance he left the main road and took the path leading to the milk seller's *mohalla*. I immediately suspected something fishy and I was not wrong." Pandit flicked the ash from his *biri*, took a deep pull at it and smiled.

Latif, the police constable whom Mirza used to pull up at the morning parade edged closer to Pandit. "Pandit, then how did things go?" a man who was standing behind Bulaki asked him.

"I feared that if Mirza happened to spot me it would spoil the whole fun. So I was careful to keep some distance between us. It was the milk sellers' lane and one could see cows and buffaloes tied outside each door. Suddenly I heard the sound of two wooden sticks being beaten together and I perked up my ears. It was Mirza striking at a churning rod with his walking stick at short intervals. After about five minutes someone emerged from a house and followed Mirza to the road skirting the big maidan. As soon as they reached the open maidan I had no difficulty in recognising both of them. On seeing me Mirza suddenly froze as if he had seen a snake.

"Mirza, is this the leopard you used to tell us about?" I asked him. Mirza seemed to have lost his tongue. He just kept gaping at the girl standing by his side.

"A girl?" Bulaki and Latif asked in unison, almost jumping up in surprise.

"Yes, a girl! The lame Ravat's daughter, Bitti Rotain. The one who goes out decked to sell milk. You think Pandit could ever go wrong?" Pandit said with an air of finality as if closing the issue.

The news about Mirza spread in the whole locality, getting more spicy in the telling as it went from mouth to mouth... From that day Mirza stopped going out for his morning walk and spent the rest of his leave, confined to his house. On resuming duty he made it a point to go straight to the parade ground. In fact, this event had changed the very tenor of his life. No more gossip sessions. He would not even stir out of his house. His front door remained closed most of the time; he would go out by the back door.

Hardly a month had passed when there was a big racket in his house...The Superintendent Police himself descended upon him, accompanied by four or five constables. The Superintendent went into a huddle with Mirza and was closeted with him for a long time. Then he called in the constables and ordered them to search Mirza's house.

"Mirza, there's still time," The SP kept warning Mirza

while the search was in progress. "Come out with the truth. It's to your good. I warn you if you are found out I can make things really difficult for you."

Of course, Mirza had told a lie. After searching his room the constable went into the verandah adjoining the kitchen and Mirza realised that the game was up and sat down looking completely done for.

They didn't find anything incriminating in the verandah. A pile of fire wood, a couple of torn and discarded bags, a hen sitting on its eggs, an empty canister and a tin of yellow clay. On one side near the grinding stones, stood a big drum.

"Does it contain paddy?" the SP asked.

Mirza made no reply. He just looked on with beseeching eyes and gave a deep sigh. A constable proceeded to turn the drum on its side and spilt out its contents on the ground. Out sprang Rotain from the drum.

The SP stood there staring at Mirza in disbelief. Then he wordlessly marched out of the house.

The next day Mirza was transferred to some other station in Bastar which was regarded as worse than a penal settlement. During the rains the place remained cut off from civilisation and one could hardly get anything to eat. A murder took place every second day followed by a mad chase into the jungles and its attendant rumpus. Mirza resigned his job in a huff.

Even after vacating his government allotment he could easily get a good house in that *mohalla* but he decided against staying there. Instead he purchased a small house near Moti Tala — an almost deserted place in those days. Perhaps he had taken this step in consideration of his health. It was thinly populated, mostly by menials, workers and the like...

It was here that Mirza started his bangle business, on a modest scale to begin with. But soon he bought a bullock cart and then they saw his old ramshackle house changing into a big, imposing structure. Bitti Rotain had no doubt tarnished his name but he clung to her. People talked about her in whispers. And then tongues stopped wagging. One day, Rotain openly defied everyone by entering Mirza's house with the whole community looking on, to live there for good. It created an uproar in her community. They came brandishing *lathis*. A respectable Hindu girl had been seduced by a Musalman!

But Bitti remained firm. She declared before her father and members of her community that she had come to Mirza's house of her own accord and not from any compulsion. She would live with him for life.

As the days passed, the event faded in the limbo of time. Bitti, the fair-complexioned sharp-featured girl who wore a dhoti upto her knees and had tatto marks on her cheeks and arms ended up as Mirza's wife.

Nothing much happened in the next four or five years. Bitti helped Mirza in his business with twice his aplomb and earned a lot. Then Mirza started hob-nobbing with a different kind of people. They were mostly bearded men who sent a shiver of fear down her spine. The people of Mirza's community had till then remained aloof from him. They thought that his infatuation for Bitti was nothing but the exuberance of youth and would subside of its own accord as time passed.

But that evening after the evening *namaz* a few white-bearded men knocked on Mirza's door. Starting with an inconsequential chat they soon came to brass tacks. They said, "Mirza it does not behove you, the son of a Muslim, to take to such evil ways. You must atleast think of your religion, if nothing else. Marry some decent girl and absolve yourself of this sin. You have only to say it and we shall find a nice girl for you—beautiful, God-fearing of good stock who says her *namaz* five times a day, a girl on whose tongue reside all the verses of the Holy Quran."

Such inroads had been made on Mirza not once but many a time in the past and he had parried all attacks, neither saying 'yes' nor 'no'. He would sit through the sessions with sealed lips and downcast eyes.

But that night Bitti saw that Mirza was looking more upset than usual. When the Musalman elders mounted their attacks, Bitti would herself get perturbed. A knock on the door and her heart would miss a beat. She would open the door all a flutter, fearing that someone had again come to put sense into Mirza's head.

For a long time Mirza withstood these attacks; they seemed to create no impression on him. At night, just to probe his mind, Bitti would often suggest that she wanted to separate from him and he would laugh her off. But lately Bitti had

sensed that Mirza had become more thoughtful as if he was all the time in a quandary may be the elders' advice had started working on him.

It was getting on to be ten. When Maulana and his companions departed from Mirza's house. Bitti had been standing outside, leaning against the door, listening to the discussion between them and trying to gauge from the expression on Mirza's face what was passing in his mind. When Mirza came and listlessly lay down on his bed the dam of Bitti's patience burst. She kept sobbing far into the night and at last said to Mirza, "You lost your government job because of me. You earned a bad name, suffered mental anguish—all because of me. And now if you spurn your community where's it all going to end? You have to think of your old age too."

Mirza turned on his side, hid his face between his arms and lay still.

"Listen, why not marry a girl of your own community?" she said, "Believe me, I'll be the last person to mind it. On the other hand it will make me happy. You can dump me in a corner of your house. I'll be content. A handful of rice and a yard-length of cloth—that's all I want. They are enough to keep me ticking."

Mirza started crying and seeing him Bitti also burst out crying.

Within a month, Mirza went through a *nikah* with Bitti, according to Muslim rites. Pitti was given a new name—Islambi. But till the last day of her life nobody called her Islambi. In the beginning most of the people called her Bitti and later on Bi Darogan, that is, the Police Inspector's wife. And that was how she was known till her very end. Even when she went to Bilaspur to perform Mirza's marriage with a Muslim girl her prestige did not suffer in any way.

Call it the irony of fate, the very month Mirza's new wife arrived, Bitti gave birth to her first son. Mirza was happy. He named the child Roshan Baig.

It was the same Roshan Baig with whom later on Junior Aunt's fate was yoked, and the unfortunate woman came to live under his roof.

SOMEONE knocked on the door and called out for Rubina by name. Junior Aunt was busy in the kitchen, so, perhaps she had not heard the call. Just then a tired, groaning voice emerged from Bhabi's room. Her child had raised a howl.

Rubi got up in a huff and proceeded towards the door, stamping her feet. The knocking on the door had become insistent. She returned holding a small plate. "Ammi, Rahim Uncle and Khan Saheb have sent us our 'portions,'" she announced, standing by the door.

Junior Aunt gave Rubina a startled look. "Who came?"

she asked. "Rahim's wife?"

"Yes, Rahim's wife. And Khan Saheb's senior wife too."

"Ya Allah!" Junior Aunt's face clouded. "Now who'll deliver them their 'portions'? Rubi, why didn't you hand them their 'portions'?" Turning to me she gave me an explaining look. "Maybe it would not have been that necessary to reciprocate," she said. "But now there's no going back on it."

Rubi made no reply and Junior Aunt dropped the subject, thinking that Rubi had after all acted sensibly. They could have taken it amiss—that we were doing it merely as part of a ritual and paying them back pat on the dot. A silly custom indeed, exchanging *rotis* and *halwa* on account of *fateha*. What about those who lacked the means of affecting 'exchanges'?

That reminded me. When I was a child, it generally fell to my lot to discharge this duty. Ammi would hand me a big platter holding about thirty or thirty-five 'portions' which I was required to deliver from door to door. Perhaps that was one reason for my developing a strong dislike for this festival. But I could do nothing about it except grumble. I would just curse the stupid customs going out on my rounds. I would deliver the 'portions' at about a score of houses and then sitting down on a culvert polish off the rest with friends. I was caught red-handed one year and henceforth was absolved of that responsibility.

"Put the things here," Junior Aunt said. "What's your Bhabi shouting at?"

"Only Allah knows," Rubina said indifferently. "It's an every day affair. Who would care to ask?"

Junior Aunt stared at Rubina as if she was on the point of saying something but had then thought the better of it. Some words also fluttered on my lips but I desisted from giving vent to my thoughts when I recalled what had transpired the other day.

At the time of marriage Junior Aunt's entire family had formally called at our house. Though Bhabi was not well at the time she had also insisted on joining them. She was in no condition to lend a hand in the chores. Even walking was too much of a strain for her. She just sat there nursing her swollen body and supervising the work. On the day, of the *nikah* her condition suddenly became worse. She could not even sit straight and was in acute pain. She kept groaning all the time.

The guests went into a hurried huddle and kept talking in whispers a long time. "Bhai, why don't you take the poor thing to the hospital?" Mumani said at last. "She can't even breathe properly. She's in terrible shape. I'm afraid she might even die."

Someone told Junior Aunt that if anything happened to Bhabi she would come in for blame. The most sensible course was to straightaway send her to hospital. If her lease of life was not over she would survive or else what God willed would happen.

As she sat surrounded by enquiring eyes, Junior Aunt cast a helpless look at her adviser. When Mohsin never missed a chance to humiliate her even in public how could she exonerate herself before this horde? She only said, "*Behan*, I wish I could explain my plight."

"I know, I know," Mumani said. "Everyone is hard up these days. Even men who are men, moustaches and all, bringing bagfuls of money every month, are having a hard time. As for you, I know you've a big problem on hand. But it's a question of life and death. It won't involve much expense to send her to the hospital. I can't stand the sight of her suffering. You just make up your mind. I'll pay for the rickshaw, I won't become a pauper."

Junior Aunt could not look Mumani in the face, so humiliated did she feel. Tears came to her eyes. She had feared this from the beginning and had importunated Bhabi to arrange for the confinement at her parents' place. But Bhabi was adamant. She said, "Ever since my marriage my parents have been looking after me and I can't be a burden on them when my in-laws are about. People would taunt me. I can't go there like a beggar and become the target of their ridicule. If I have to live I'll escape death. It's all in one's luck...."

In the end Bhabi did not go to her parents'. Nor to the hospital. Even now Mohsin went away from home early in the morning and returned late at night. And even today Bhabi is hovering between life and death...

"*Arre*, Rubani, *beti*, I forgot the opium," Suddenly Junior Aunt looked up, startled. "It's lying in a packet in the alcove. Go and bring it for me."

In the last days of his life Mirza had started taking a tiny

doze of opium daily. It was the first item of purchase in the morning's shopping and the most important one. It was Bi Darogan's responsibility till the very end. Even when Mirza's new bride came from Bilaspur no deviation was made in this practice.

Within a few days of her coming the new wife had realised that even though she was Mirza's legally wedded wife she had to be more careful of her co-wife than her husband. Not even a leaf stirred without her permission.

The new wife got up in the morning while it was still dark, swept and cleaned the floors, boiled the water for tea and then pressed Mirza's feet for an hour or so. She kept at it till Bi Darogan called to her from outside to stop. She was on her toes throughout the day. She looked after Bi's child and was alert to her smallest command, as if every step of hers was made to order and she could not take an extra step on her own. Not Mirza's but Bi's writ ran in the house.

But that morning she suddenly gave way to feelings which created quite a scene.

Mirza was awake. She was pressing his legs. When she came to his back and then the neck, overcome by some strange impulse, Mirza caught her arm, pulled her to himself and said in an adoring voice, "I never know when you come and when you go."

She was always late from work at night. It was almost eleven when she finished her chores. It often happened that, tired and broken, when she proceeded towards Mirza's room she found his door bolted from inside and Bi missing from her bed in her room. Since she had no room or bed of her own, the new wife would sit outside Mirza's door, waiting for it to open. It was only when Bi came out that she could go in and give some rest to her tired back.

But such occasions were few and far between. Often the door remained shut all night and the Bilaspur wife had to drop her weary body in some corner and snatch some sleep. In the morning, Bi Darogan would jump across her and shake her into wakefulness. "Shameless hussy!" she would growl. "Must you lie at the door just to gape me? If you had any sense of shame you would have gone to the other room and slept there. Of course, he has married you but that does not mean that he should

have fun with you every night."

How vulgar Bi could be. The Bilaspur wife avoided going to Mirza's room at night and in the morning when she went to press his legs she found him fast asleep.

So that morning when Mirza said a kind word to her it sent a ripple of joy through her heart. It was the first time after their marriage that Mirza had said something nice to her. She stopped pressing his legs and stood still for an instant. And then as if to reassure herself she place her palm on Mirza's hand to have a feel of it. "You would have known if you had ever waited for me," she said, thrilled. "I come every morning and for this, in Bi Apa's eyes, I've lost all sense of shame. She keeps taunting me throughout the day."

Mirza heard her wordlessly. Only, his grip on her arm tightened and he started breathing heavily.

The Bilaspur wife waited for him to say something. But it appeared that he had nothing to say. "Tell me one thing," she said at last. "Why did you perform *nikah* with me? Was it for yourself? Or it was to make me Bi Apa's bonds slave?"

Even her blunt question failed to provoke Mirza into giving a reply. The morning light had started filtering in through the window. For an instant he held the Bilaspur wife with his gaze and then pulled her to himself. As she lay by his side he kept caressing her back. She started sobbing.

Then they heard Bi Darogan's angry voice, "Eh, you, Bilaspurwali! are you on holiday from work?"

There was no response from within the room. Stricken with fear, the Bilaspur bahu tried to get up but Mirza pulled her back "Let her scream," he said. "Let us see how long she can keep at it."

At last when the morning had fairly advanced the Bilaspur wife got up and walked out of Mirza's room on teetery steps. Bi Darogan was sitting on the plinth, muttering, while her son, Roshan, who had just woken, lay whimpering in front of her. The Bilaspur wife could not pick up courage to look in their direction.

She was proceeding towards the kitchen when Bi Darogan said in a sharp voice, "So you have been able to get time, Maharani? But where was the hurry? You could have as well taken some more time for those blandishments!"

The Bilaspur wife stopped in her tracks.

"Really, you have no sense of shame," Bi Darogan said. "You quaffed it off with water long ago. A curse on your youth! You should have brought a maid servant with you."

The Bilaspur wife pirouetted on her heels, her face tingling with rage. She had to make an effort to hold back her words. She glared at Bi Darogan and adjusted the covering which had slipped down from her head.

"How dare you ?" Bi Darogan fumed, shifting on her haunches. "Whom are you glaring at ? Slut ! *Haramzadi* ! Lazy bones!"

Discretion getting the better of her anger, the Bilaspur wife bit her lips, looked back disdainfully and swiftly walked off towards the kitchen.

Swift as an arrow, Mirza emerged from his room. "What's this game going on here?" he roared. "The morning has not even started and you're already at it. Can't you leave me in peace even for a moment ? All the time I see you gnashing your teeth and yelping like a cur."

For a moment Bi Darogan was stunned into silence and kept looking at Mirza with a blank expression. Then she said in a sharp voice: "Who's playing the game? I ? Who's gnashing her teeth? I ? So I don't let you live in peace? Now that this slut is there to give you all the comfort! *Hai Ram*, how shifty-eyed like a parrot!"

"Keep quiet, will you?" Mirza cried. "There's a limit to everything. You are always after her. You have made her life hell. If you are so jealous of her why did let me marry her? You've duped me into playing with the life of a young girl."

But Bi Darogan was too angry to hear what Mirza was saying. "*Hai Ram*, what parrot-like perfidy," she repeated. Her voice became strained and then she started wailing to the accompaniment of a barrage of complaints—that she had sacrificed her life for his comforts, that she had renounced her family for him, that she had even thrown her religion overboard for his sake. But God saw everything. He was just. The evil doer would certainly come to a bad end.

Mirza stood there looking utterly foolish. His anger had proved ineffective. It was for the first time that he had shown his fangs and Bi Darogan had taken no notice of it. On the

other hand, Mirza was getting worried. What would the neighbours say when they heard this uncouth woman bawling with the full strength of her lungs? He just gnashed his teeth and glared at her. "*Arre*, Bitti, won't you stop?" he at last said in utter despair.

His admonition had no effect on her. She kept yelling in the same pitch, in the same rhythm, driving Mirza mad. He ran towards her. "*Sali*" he cried. "You've betrayed your origin—the menial that you are. Will you stop yelling or do you want me to slit your throat?"

Mad with rage, Mirza caught her by her neck and shook her like the branch of a tree. But Bi Darogan kept raving. "Kill me!" she cried. "Let me see how you slit my throat. If you're the son of your father "

The Bilaspur bride was still in the kitchen. She didn't have the courage to face them. Finally she rushed out and holding Mirza, struggled to separate him from Bi Darogan.

At her touch, Bi Darogan fretted and struggled with the nimbleness of a hare. Flailing her arms and legs, she cried, "Keep your dirty hands off me! Don't act pious!"

That Mirza had given up the effort to bring a truce between the two had only emboldened Bi Darogan; she had kept up her attack. At last she wriggled out of the Bilaspur bahoo's hold and abused her filthily. Not satisfied, she picked up a chopper lying by her side and hurled it at her. Luckily it missed its mark, otherwise it would have damaged the Bilaspur bahoo's eye.

Holding her head between her hands, the Bilaspur wife sat down in a heap on the floor. Mirza looked at Bi Darogan, petrified. Then he stepped forward and knocking her down, kicked her in her back. Panting, he helped the Bilaspur bride to her feet. "Leave the wretch alone," he said, gnashing his teeth. "A low-born woman!"

Taking no further notice of Bi Darogan's fulminations, Mirza took Bilaspurwali to his room.

That day the daily routine was observed as usual. The hearth was lighted and the kitchen tidied up. The utensils were scrubbed and the food cooked. But nobody partook of the afternoon meal. Bi Darogan cried as long as her larynx cooperated with her and then she disappeared into her room with her child.

Mirza had left the house after taking his morning tea. When he returned in the evening he found the house steeped in silence. The Bilaspur bahoo, who had been sitting in the kitchen waiting for him, had finally fallen asleep and keeled over to one side. The hearth had gone cold. The pots, dark with soot, were lying untouched.

Mirza tip-toed into the kitchen and stood looking down at Bilaspurwali. Her knees drawn up, her shoulders and head resting against the wall, she was sleeping peacefully. The covering from her head and bosom had slipped. A red clot had formed on the side of her head where the chopper had hit her. Her lips were slightly parted and her breasts rose and fell with every breath.

Mirza looked unblinkingly at his newly-married wife as if he was seeing her minutely for the first time. He wondered why he had been neglecting her all this while. He should have realised that she was ten times more attractive and youthful than Bi Darogan. Why had he kept dancing to Bi Darogan's tune, blind to the young woman's charm, qualities and sweet nature. He had not even cared to look to her comforts.

Moving down from her uncovered head and glowing face, his gaze came to rest on her naked throat round which lay a small gold chain into which black beads were woven. He realised that though six months had passed since his second marriage, his wife was bereft of any jewellery. It had occurred to him in passing only once before.

One morning when the Bilaspur bride was pressing his legs, his hand had inadvertently fallen over her wrist. Except for the wedding bangles no other ornament adorned her wrists or forearms. Even earrings were missing; there were instead, the stems of peacock feathers pierced through her earlobes.

"Where are your ornaments?" he had asked in surprise. "You had brought quite a few with your dowry."

"They are all lying with you."

"Why? Are ornaments meant to be kept under lock and key?"

"No," she had laughed. "They are meant to be worn. But only on special occasions. Bi Apa said that she would keep them safe in her custody and that I could have them when I went out on visits".

Mirza had dropped the matter at that. But on numerous occasions when he saw her going out without ornaments he had casually asked Bi Darogan why she had taken them away.

"Who says I have taken them away?" she had retorted. "They are only in my safe keeping. Must she deck herself with finery even in the house? And if you feel hurt over it—well, here are the keys. Take out the ornaments and let her wear the whole lot."

"No, no, I didn't mean it that way," Mirza said returning her the key. "I was just asking."

After that he never raised the issue although he often saw Bi Darogan wearing those ornaments in the house.

And now he knew the truth. As he saw his young wife from close quarters his heart filled with compassion. "Banno!" he called to her.

The Bilaspur bride woke up with a start and pulled the *dopatta* over her head.

"Were you sleeping?"

"No. Oh, no." The Bilaspur bahoo tried to rise to her feet. "I just had a cat nap. Come, I'll serve you your food."

She got up to fetch the food when Mirza stretched out his hand, barring her way. He cast an amorous look at her and then, pulling her to himself, kissed her.

While he was eating she told him that Bi Darogan had not even washed and was lying in her room from morning. She had gone to her seve: 1 times but she had refused to speak to her. She had, however, fed Roshan.

Mirza heard her in silence

This state of sullen silence lasted many days. When Mirza was in the house she would remain resentfully mute. But the moment he stepped out of the house she would start her barrage of taunts and abuses. The Bilaspur bahoo would swallow the insult for she didn't know how to retaliate. If she had complained to Mirza it would have only worsened things. This continued for many months.

Till then, Bi Darogan had helped Mirza at the markets. But after this feud she stopped doing it. First she came up with some excuse or the other but in the end she openly told him that this was none of her job. "What about the other woman?" she asked point blank. "Am I the only one left to drudge and

wallow in the dust of the countryside while your pet stays easily indoors behind seven curtains?"

Mirza listened to her wordlessly. After that he never asked her either to stay back or go with him. He left it to her sweet will. He began going to the markets alone which sapped his energy and started telling upon his health. Within two years his health had markedly deteriorated.

One day Bilaspurwali said, "It must be a great strain on you. I am told that sometimes you don't even have a proper meal. If you continue like this it will undermine your health."

Mirza smiled. "Who says I'm not careful? Skipping a meal once in a while does no harm."

"If you don't take it amiss may I ask you something? Why not take me along with you on your next trip? I'll learn how to slip on the bangles on customers' wrists. Purdah does not mean just covering one's face. What really matters is how one conducts oneself. At least I'll see to it that you don't starve."

Mirza laughed and playfully shook her shoulder. "You mean you'll sit in the bazaar with uncovered face?" he asked.

"Why, what's wrong about it?" she said. "You'll be there by my side. If Bi Apa could go with you why can't I?"

Mirza made no reply. He just laughed. "In this condition?" he asked after a pause, looking at her body.

The Bilaspur wife looked at him embarrassed. And there the matter ended.

Three more years passed and during this period Bilaspurwali became mother twice. But unfortunately both her children perished. People only saw Bi Darogan's son, Roshan, playing in the courtyard.

They were the last days of February, full of life and tumble, it being the main season for business in the countryside. When out on business, Mirza had to keep away from home for many weeks at a stretch. No sooner had one country fair ended when another began. The entire market would shift, lock, stock and barrel, to another village, leaving behind only dust, footmarks, potholes and denuded maidans, with dry leaves scattered over them.

A country fair has its own ethos. A throng of people, specially young men and women assembling from distant places. A feast of colour, a ceaseless flurry of activity of saris of a

variety of colours, handkerchiefs, rivulets of *paan* juice, shops heaped high with parched gram and the rush of rippling laughter. A country bazaar has a tone of its own which one can tell from a distance. Over the tents, seen through clouds of dust, flutter red and yellow buntings depicting various gods and goddesses and then one hears the drumbeats in many rhythms and the clash of castanets, creating a riot of sounds.

Mirza had a busy time at these fairs, oblivious of time, not knowing when the day dawned and the night fell. Suddenly his condition took a bad turn.

One night when his bullock cart stopped outside his house it was not Mirza who got down from it. It was a stranger who knocked on the door and had carried out Mirza from the cart. He told them that Mirza had been in bad shape for many days but had still been attending to his business which had only worsened his condition.

As Mirza was brought in, Bilaspurwali looked at him under the dim light of the lantern and started crying. Mirza's body was burning with fever. He had not shaved for many days and the hollows in his cheeks had become deeper. He lay there listless with closed eyes.

In the night he called for Roshan and seating him on the bed by his side he kept staring at him for a long time. Bilaspurwali was pressing his legs and Bi was sitting at the head of his bed seeing him staring at the child. They leaned over him and anxiously looked at his face. "Why are you staring at the child like this?" Bi Darogan asked. "Don't you know him? He's your son, Roshan."

Mirza made no reply. He just closed his eyes and started crying.

A month and a half later, one night he again behaved exactly in the same manner. But this time he was thinking of Banno, his wife from Bilaspur. "I've not done well by you," he moaned again and again. "I was wrong on my part to have dragged you here. How will Fate deal with you when I'm gone?"

Tears ran down Bilaspurwali's eyes. Her lips trembled, her jaws shook but no words came out of her mouth.

In the morning Mirza's condition became critical. He had a lock-jaw. In the evening they read the *yasina* for him and by

eleven he was gone, leaving behind Bi Darogan, Roshan and the most unfortunate of them all—Bilaspurwali....

Before the *aiyat* ended, I wiped my face and prayed to God, O, Benefactor, let the benefit of the *fateha* go to Mirza Karamat Baig's soul.

MANY messages of condolence came at Mirza's *chehelum*. Besides the women and children of the neighbourhood who had gathered at his house, a host of people had come from distant places. There was a regular flow of people from early morning. They paid their respects and left.

Bi Darogan, a picture of grief, was sitting in a corner, lamenting loudly, while two or three women, themselves in tears, were sitting by her side, trying to comfort her. But it made her cry all the louder, till her wails changed into hiccups and her cries became longer.

"Oh, God, why have you visited this calamity on me?" she wailed. "You should have dealt death to me, the unworthy

one." A long sigh followed. "My Mirza,—turban on his head, collyrium in his eyes, such a stately body he had! Oh, Allah, why have you let me down? I renounced my parents, my religion, for your sake and you have betrayed me, leaving me midstream. Roshan, my child, you have been orphaned. Now whom will you call to as father? *Hai*, now who will bring me flowers every morning? Who will call me Bitti? Allah, I feel helpless. Oh, my Allah!"

Batul's grandmother, who had been twisting and turning, listening to this unending lamentation going on for the past one hour, at last lost patience. "Will your lamentation bring Mirza back to life?" she asked in desperation. "You are only adding to your sins by hurting his soul. Stop crying. Think of your child, think of your house. . . ."

Bilaspurwali, her veil pulled over her face, was busy attending to her chores, shuttling between the kitchen, the store room and the courtyard. A maund and a half of fine rice had been soaked in water to make *pullao* for the *chehelum* ceremony. In another corner three slaughtered goats were being skinned. They were pestering Bilaspurwali about small details. "*Dulhan*, where have you kept the turmeric? How many onions are to be cut? I've already pounded garlic and ginger. Shall we start putting on the rice for the *pullao*? Its time we started, on it will be too late. The evening is already upon us."

The evening was fast approaching. Bilaspurwali had remained so busy that she had lost track of time. Nobody had seen her cry or becomes coax consolation as though she was lost to other things. And once having set her heart upon discharging her responsibilities she did not snatch a minute's rest.

As night fell people burst upon the scene to participate in the *chehelum* feast. They ate in shifts, seated on the ground, one shift following another. After every shift the utensils were hurriedly cleaned and the floor swept. The servers were so busy that they didn't even have time to breathe.

Even at that fateful time Bi Darogan sat surrounded by women and kept up her wailing, without budging from her place. As Bilaspurwali passed by, carrying a platter of *pullao* a sympathiser of Bi Darogan said in a taunting voice, "He who was fated to die is gone. How are we concerned? We are only interested in our *pullao*." Obviously, the taunt was aimed at the

Bilaspur wife.

When all the guests were gone Bilaspurwali brought food for Bi Darogan. "You must eat," she said, sitting down by her side. But Bi refused to look at the plate of food and burst out crying. Though the night was far advanced she again started with her lamentations.

The night passed and the day dawned.

After breakfast, Bilaspurwali was sorting out her things in Mirza's room when Bi Darogan came in, coughing. There were two boxes lying in front of her into which she was stuffing her things. Bi Darogan saw the boxes and then turned her gaze on Bilaspurwali. "Have you really decided to go?" she asked, giving her a searching look.

"Yes."

"So soon? Even the earth on his grave has not dried yet."

Bilaspurwali made no reply. She just kept gathering her things.

A clay lamp was burning in the corner in which Mirza's dead body had been bathed. The lamp was to remain there for forty days. Bilaspurwali diligently trimmed its wick everyday. The fortieth day was just over and there was no more work left to be done.

In the interval Bilaspurwali had thrown hints about visiting her parents. It had no doubt caused Bi Darogan some surprise but she thought the woman was not serious about it, that she was saying it just to impress her. "Let the *chehelum* be over," she had replied, "and then you'll be free to act as you think best." She had all the same a lurking fear that the Bilaspurwali may go away after all.

"Are you really going tomorrow?" she asked in a placatory tone.

"Yes," Bilaspurwali said, closing the lid of her box. "I've to go any way," she added. "Why not make it tomorrow? I see nothing wrong about it. The fortieth day rites are over."

"With whom will you go? Have you thought over that?"

"I can go alone. I don't need a chaperone."

Bi Darogan was silent for a while. Then she said in a sarcastic tone: "A young woman going to a distant place, unescorted! Yes, it's just the thing to do. Throw away your veil as soon as you enter the bus and start trading looks with all and

sundry. Anyway, it's your look out, not mine. But don't blame me afterwards. Let no one say that the very next day after Mirza's death I drove you into carrying on like a hussy."

Bilaspurwali refused to be provoked. She meekly followed Bi Darogan out of the room.

"Where are my ornaments?" she asked in a faint voice.

Bi Darogan sharply turned round and glared at Bilaspurwali. "A widow and such love for jewelry!" she said in a mocking tone. "Are you going to wear them?"

"Who said I'm going to wear them?"

"Then what do you want to see them for?" Bi Darogan's voice hardened. "Aren't you coming back?" She smiled.

"What other place do I have to live in? No parents are prepared to harbour a young daughter for life."

The ornaments did not change hands. Bi Darogan explained to Bilaspur bahoo the logic of it : If she was not going to wear them there was no point in carrying them with her. In the first place she was going unchaperoned. And in the second place it was not safe to carry ornaments in a bus. They could be stolen. Thefts these days were quite common.

Bilaspurwali left by bus the next day. Bi Darogan bade her good bye with the words: "Forgive me if I have hurt you in any manner."

She was not wrong in her conjecture. The Bilaspur bahoo went away never to return.

Word went round that Bi Darogan had been unkind to her co-wife. She had made herself such a tyrant that the poor woman had perforce to leave. They said she used to make her drudge like a draft animal. She didn't even give her enough to eat.

Bi Darogan lightly brushed aside strictures against her. She contended that it was one more story against her, blown out of all proportions, just from spite.

Eight or so in the evening. Having finished her meal Bi Darogan was preparing to retire for the night. It was a big house and she was living alone in it with her son, Roshan. It looked so empty and lonely, creating such an eerie atmosphere. The residents of the *mohalla* were a funny lot. As soon as the evening dusk began, they shut their doors and remained cooped up in their rooms for the night. It seemed as if they had cut off all links with the outside world. I gave a damn to you, just

as you give a damn to me, they seemed to say.

Bi Darogan had just laid down in bed and was cajoling Roshan to sleep when someone called her from outside. She lay still, trying to recognise whose voice it could be. The times were bad and one could not be too careful.

At last, overcoming her fear, she raised the wick of her lantern and holding it in her hand she stood near the door. "Who's there?" she asked in a bold voice.

The visitor did not say his name. "It's I," he replied in a steady voice. "Please open the door."

Bi Darogan stood there thinking for a while and then opening the door she peered at the man but still failed to recognise him. She hesitated and then asked the visitor to come in.

"Bhabhi, don't you recognise me?" the man said. "I'm Rajju" he added, sitting down.

Bi Darogan started laughing. "Yes, I recognised you all right. I couldn't make you out from your voice."

A face appeared before her eyes—Mirza's tired and weary face over which the lines of a smile were suddenly etched. A comparatively younger man with nebulous features was sitting by his side. And Mirza was telling her that it was Rajju Mian who had come from Gaya. Mirza had run into him just by chance and had brought him home with him. "Bitti, he is a distant relative of mine," Mirza had told her. "He knows I live here but he has never taken the trouble of seeking me out . . ."

"Were you sleeping?"

Bi Darogan gave a start at Rajju Mian's unexpected question. "No," she said looking at him. "I was trying to put Roshan to sleep. A strange place—this. As soon as it is evening a silence descends over the whole *mohalla*. Here people don't visit one another."

At Mirza's death many people, big and small, had come to condole with the family. Bi Darogan had handled them with great tact. She talked with those who had never come before, standing behind the door. She was less formal with friends and acquaintances of the family and talked with them without any inhibition. Rajju came in the latter category. She made a spectacle of herself by crying before him, so much so, that

even Rajju started crying and then wiped his face with the end of his dhoti.

"You didn't come to the *chehelum*. Didn't you get our invitation?"

"I must have got it, "Rajju Mian replied. "But I was not at home at that time. I returned only last night."

A few moments' silence.

"I thought it was someone come to rent the house."

"What do you mean by renting out the house?"

"I'm thinking of letting out a portion. I've no use for the whole house. It's too big for me and I feel so lonely in it that sometimes I get scared. I thought that if I could get a good tenant it would mean some company for me."

Rajju Mian kept his thoughts to himself. He just kept staring into the distance as if lost in thought.

"How do you manage to live?" he asked.

"Mirza's earnings went on his treatment and the little savings he had were spent on his *chehelum*. Till now I've not stirred out of the house and have somehow been able to fend for myself. And as for what's coming only God can tell."

"Surely, you must have given the matter some thought, "Rajju Mian said. "One has to work in order to live."

"What can a lonely woman do? When Mirza was alive he was a great support and I gave him a helping hand. I know this business of bangles inside out. I can go to the local market all right but it is beyond me to replenish stocks from city markets."

Rajju Mian looked straight at Bi Darogan's face and then striking an intimate note said: "Bhabi, I know Mirza is no more. But what makes you say that you are alone in the world? Do I mean nothing to you?"

Tears came to Bi Darogan's eyes. She wiped her eyes with the *pallav* of her sari and said: "You wouldn't have come if I had meant nothing to you. I'm telling you the truth. But for good people like you I would have gone away from here long ago. The same way as the Bilaspurwali left."

"Yes, I've heard that Younger Bhabi has gone to her parents' place. She had no trouble living here, I suppose."

Bi Darogan laughed. "It is not a question of comfort or no comfort. As a young woman how long can she live on the memories of Mirza?"

Suddenly Roshan appeared from the inner room. He hesitated for a moment on seeing a stranger with his mother. Then he advanced and sat down in his mother's lap.

Bi Darogan held his hand. "Son, he is your uncle. Pay him your salaam."

Rajju leaned forward and stretching out his hands asked him to come over to him. He kept gesturing to him but Roshan refused to oblige.

After an hour, when leaving, Rajju Mian made one more attempt, but Roshan refused to budge from his place. Rajju told Bi Darogan that he would be visiting Raipur in a day or two and if she so desired, she could give him a list of the things she wanted to buy from there. He would buy the goods on her behalf.

Long after Rajju Mian was gone Bi Darogan kept standing at the outer door of her house peering into the dark. Then she took a deep sigh, carefully bolted the door and came in.

Three days later, when it was still light a big horse stopped outside Bi Darogan's house and Rajju Mian dismounted from it.

Roshan was playing in front of his house while Bi Darogan was standing at the door. They had pricked up their ears on hearing the sound of hooves, and then they saw Rajju, wearing his riding habit, come into view.

Closing one flap of her door, Bi Darogan watched him from behind the other. Then adjusting the *pallav* of her sari, she gave him an imperceptible smile, making Rajju vaguely aware of her presence.

"I was taking this horse on a round of the tank," Rajju said greeting her with a low salaam. "I thought I'll stop by to see how you are getting along. So what have you decided, Bhabhi?"

"Decided about what?"

"About your business, of course. I'm going to Raipur tomorrow. If you have made up your mind and have faith in me I can buy the goods for you from there."

"Allah, how you talk! have I not faith in you?"

Rajju Mian started laughing.

"Come, please step in." Picking up Roshan, Bi Darogan walked into the house, Rajju Mian following her.

She spread a cot in the courtyard and asked Rajju to make

himself comfortable. Then taking out her *paandan*, she sat down on the plinth.

"Give me one sample each of those bangles," Rajju Mian said. "I mean especially the ones that sell fast. The fancy ones and the cheap ones separately. And how much stock you want to have for three months. You know one can't make such trips every day."

Bi Darogan thought over the matter while cutting areca nuts. She folded and made a *paan* and offered it to Rajju Mian. Then she went in and fetched some bangles. Rajju Mian made some jottings on a piece of paper and put it into his pocket. Soon darkness crept over the courtyard, making Rajju Mian's figure hazy. But Bi Darogan did not get up from her place nor lit the lamp. They sat in silence in the dark. The horse standing outside the house neighed. "I'll make a move," Rajju Mian said, getting up abruptly.

"All right .." Bi Darogan got up resting her hands on her knees and came up to the door to see Rajju Mian off.

Rajju Mian picked up Roshan. "How about a joy ride?" he asked.

Roshan declined the offer but a week later when Rajju Mian returned from Raipur he did not see any horse standing outside his door. Rajju Mian was busy inside. He had neatly arranged a colourful display of bangles on a mat. Roshan came straight into his lap and insisted on having a ride on his horse. The next day Rajju Mian came to Bi Darogan's house riding his horse and after that it became a daily routine. When he came pat at five he would find Roshan along with Bi Darogan waiting for him outside his house.

Roshan would clap his hands and then ask to be picked up.

"What a naughty child!" Bi Darogan would lovingly remark, putting him down from her lap. "He gets so worked up seeing you that he even forgets me. He loves to ride and keeps waiting for you."

Rajju would pick up Roshan and plant a noisy kiss on his cheek. "Of course, he must remember me," he would lisp like a child. "Roshan is my son. Son, are you my son or your mother's?"

Roshan would look at his mother and then at his uncle and pointing his finger at him, cling to his neck. Rajju Mian

would laugh while Bi Darogan would rebuke him in mock anger. Then Rajju and the boy would disappear in a cloud of dust raised by the horse's hoofs.

It would be dark when they returned. Leaving Roshan outside at the door Rajju Mian would say, "Go in, son. I must go back home."

But Roshan would seize his hand and drag him into the house "A naughty boy!" he would look at Bi Darogan and laugh. "A devil of a boy to drag me so hard!"

Bi Darogan would play-act, trying to rescue Rajju Mian from the child's clutches. "Leave him," she would protest. "He has to go home. As if he has nothing else to do except sit with you."

This tug-of-war ultimately ended in Rajju Mian's staying on and leaving late at night. Mother and son, seated on the plinth some distance from him, would see his nebulous figure, silhouetted over the cot in the courtyard. A *paandaan* would rest in front of her. She and Rajju would exchange stray remarks, interspersed with long periods of silence. For instance:

"Roshan is now old enough to go to school."

"Yes, he does nothing but waste his time in playing with undesirable children. I am thinking of putting him in school as soon as the school vacation is over."

"What's his age? Couldn't be less than five."

"He has yet to complete his fifth year. First he must form the habit of going to school. It's only then that he can seriously apply his mind to studies."

Silence....

"What do you do on the days you don't go to the bazaar?"

"Nothing. There's hardly anything to do. I cook if fancy takes me. Or I don't. I look after Roshan or I go to sleep."

"By now customers must have started calling at your house."

"Only at times. Not regularly. Sometimes ladies from big houses drop in. Sometimes people call me to their homes but I refuse to go. It doesn't look proper to me."

Another silence lasting a few minutes....

"When are you free from duty?"

"My duty doesn't matter. I'm in the cavalry. All that I've to do is to keep the horse in trim. I take it out for airing."

“Then what do you do the whole day?”

At this question Rajju gave her a meaningful glance and smiled. He had no ready answer for her question.

By this time Roshan would have fallen asleep or would keep lying in his mother's lap. At last Rajju would get up and Bi Darogan would see him off at the door. Each time Rajju Mian would apologise at having stayed so late.

After a few days there was a sudden change in his routine which became a cause of annoyance to Roshan.

That day he came to her house in the afternoon instead of the usual five o'clock. Roshan was asleep and Bi Darogan was having her bath. The door opened after many insistent calls. But Bi avoided facing him. “I was having my bath,” she said on unlatching the door. “I'm not properly dressed. Just give me time to go in before you enter.”

Rajju Mian stood outside the door, smiling and entered only on getting a hint that she had gone in. He sat down on the cot in the courtyard under the sun while she kept talking to him from inside the bathroom. When she emerged from the bathroom she insisted that Rajju Mian should have his meal with her.

The same thing happened the following day. Rajju Mian again came in the afternoon but this time not on his horse. He told Roshan that his horse was not well and since the veterinary surgeon had advised that it should be rested for some time he would have to miss his usual evening ride. God only knew if there was any truth in what he had said for after that day he never came on his horse. He did visit, nevertheless, every evening and spent a long time chatting with Bi Darogan.

“You were thinking of letting out the front portion of your house, weren't you?” he asked one night before leaving.

“Of course, I want to let it out,” she said cautiously after a brief silence. “But I have not come across a good tenant. One or two people came but they had no families. They were singletons. So I refused.”

“But why?”

“There is no answer for a why. If he is not a family man what good can he be to me? On the other hand...”

Her gaze travelled to Rajju Mian's face and she lowered her head. She felt as if he was still looking at her and that she would

not be able to stand his glance.

After a while Rajju Mian said, "I'm also thinking of leaving my house."

"Why, what's happened?"

"Nothing has happened. But that locality is not good." Rajju Mian paused for an instant and gave Bi an intense look. "Can't I get a house elsewhere?" he asked.

Bi Darogan was silent for a long time, lost in thought. When Rajju Mian repeated his question she said, "How can I tell you?"

As if he had been waiting for some such answer he did not press the matter further and started playing with Roshan. He counted his fingers, tickled his sides and then lifted him on his shoulders. "Son, would you like to live with me in my house?" he asked.

"How far is your house?"

"Quite far."

"Have you a mother in your house?"

"No, son, I don't have a mother."

"Are you listening, Amma? Uncle says he has no mother."

I smiled. "Ask him if he has an Aunt?"

"Have you an Aunt?"

"No, son, I don't have an Aunt, either."

"Then how can I stay with you?" Roshan looked disappointed. "Shall we take Amma along?" he asked.

Bi Darogan and Rajju Mian looked at each other, startled. But Roshan still pursued the subject. "Uncle, why don't you come and stay with us?" he asked.

Bi Darogan quickly got up from her place and picked up Roshan in her lap. "Go and sleep," she said in mock anger. "And stop being a wiseacre."

Rajju Mian got up, a faint smile playing on his face, and patted Roshan on his cheek. As usual, Bi Darogan went to the door to see him off. Standing behind the door she said, dropping her voice to a whisper, "I won't mind having you as a tenant but what'll the people say?"

Rajju Mian's foot remained arrested in the air. "What people are you talking about?" he asked.

"Our neighbours. Our relatives among whom I live. You drop in just to spend some time with me and over that people

wag their tongues”.

After a moment's silence Rajju Mian said, “If you pay heed to what people say you won't be able to live for a day. What do they say, anyway?”

“Why do you want to know? It'll serve no purpose. They say what people generally say when they see things from a distance” Bi Darogan gave a hollow laugh. “But I care a fig for them.”

There were scandals galore. Crude, outlandish, laced with sarcasm. It had become difficult for Bi Darogan to stir out of her house and talk with the women of the *mohalla*. But it was equally true that she was indifferent to it all.

One day Rajju Mian came in a cart and unloaded all his things in broad daylight in front of Bi Darogan's house. Then he started living in that house and soon after he started eating from the same kitchen. It was not merely a matter of a day or two, or of a month or a year. He had come to stay for good. The first three or four years passed just like that. One day it was proclaimed that Rajju Mian had had a *nikah* and that he and Bi Darogan had become man and wife. He was a straightforward man and a man of his word at that. He stood by Bi through thick and thin and at last the fortunate Bi Darogan went on her last journey, resting on Rajju Mian's shoulders, wearing a red sheet and decked in all the paraphernalia of a married woman.

It gave my heart a wrench. I don't know whether it was for Mirza or for Bi Darogan. As I look round I find that all the articles of *fateha* have been neatly arrayed in the required order. Like a devoted daughter-in-law Junior Aunt has attended to the smallest detail concerning her mother-in-law. So much so that she has not even forgotten the flower that she used to tuck into her hair.

In my imagination the Bi Darogan of bygone days came and stood before me exactly as she was when my eyes had first landed on her. A fat, flabby and sprawling body, tattoo marks on her arms and hands. A burnt coppery complexion and lips constantly working over a toothless mouth . . .

It sounds so bizarre. Bi Darogan was born in one place and brought up in another. She was married to one man, was buried by the hands of another and now a third was reciting her elegy.

A lantern sheds a feeble light, not bright enough to enable one to distinguish the things on the wall. If there were enough light or it were daytime one could have easily distinguished the picture on the wall, as if it were speaking of itself.

It was a framed picture, hanging on the wall opposite the door. It could not have been less than fifteen years old. One could see the entire family in it. Bi Darogan and Rajju Mian sitting in the middle in the roles of father-in-law and mother-in-law and Roshan uncle standing by their side attired in European clothes. On one side sat Junior Aunt, looking demure and diffident, her face partially covered with a veil although she was the mother of eight children. In front the children were

squatting in a row.

I don't know what Rajju Uncle used to wear before I came to know him. But since the time I had first set my eyes upon him I had always seen him wearing a loose *shaluka* and a dhoti reaching upto his knees. This dress, whether he remained in the house or went out never changed. There was a departure from it only at the time of Id or when he went to Raipur on his buying expedition. On such occasions, the *shaluka* was replaced by a *kamiz* and *achkan* and narrow Aligarh pajamas took the place of the dhoti. He wound an orange coloured turban over his head and applied collyrium to his eyes in a thick smear.

In the picture Rajju Mian was wearing the same special clothes, a smile breaking through his neatly trimmed pepper-and-salt moustache. He also sported a beard of the same colour.

Rajju Mian had migrated from Gaya in Bihar and had joined as a horseman in the state forces of Bastar. Till his very end he never forgot to remind us that he had still a large number of relatives living in Gaya and that he owned property and lands there. But like Mirza, having come to Bastar he did not think of going back to his native place. Maybe he had visited his native place during the first two or three years of his arrival but after marrying Bi he did not visit Gaya even once.

He used to tell Bi Darogan about his people back home but in spite of her importunities he did not visit Gaya even on special occasions such as the deaths of his uncle and sister.

The news of their deaths had saddened his heart. He moaned over their loss for he really loved them and they meant a lot to him. And there the matter ended.

Bi Darogan would taunt him: "How bad of you! If you have no feelings for your kith and kin where do we come into the picture?"

Rajju Mian would laugh, "That's why I tell you, don't force me to go there. For then I may never return. That's where I belong and that's where I might well stay."

"Tell me, honestly," Bi Darogan would ask. "Did you marry there? Maybe you have a wife and children living there, bemoaning their lot at your desertion and their curses may fall on my innocent head."

"You've not tied me down to this place with rope, or have you?" Rajju Mian would reply. "If my wife and children were living there I would have deserted you and gone away long ago."

Tears would come to Bi Darogan's eyes and she would say in a strained voice, "I know I have sinned a lot in my life. But heaven help me, save me from this sin."

Roshan was twelve years old and studying in school when Rajju Mian had his *nikah* with Bi Darogan. They could have done without it as they had been living together for five years in complete harmony but Rajju Mian had insisted upon it. "One can't trust one's life," he had said. "If I die tomorrow what's going to happen to you? The people of my community will not even lend their shoulders to my dead body and instead of being consigned to the grave it will be thrown to the jackals. No, no, I'll not let such a state of affairs continue."

Bi Darogan hesitated till the last moment. "What will the people say?" was her constant refrain. "It will earn me a bad name—that this woman took a new husband soon after the first husband was dead. Roshan is also growing. He may not say anything now but he will surely castigate us two years hence."

"Don't we earn a bad name by living as we do now? For an individual morning is when he wakes up. If a mistake is rectified betimes it's no more a mistake. Perhaps you don't have enough faith in me. You doubt whether I will be able to stand by you or not. You may be secretly harbouring the fear that one day I may ditch you."

"No, its not that," she would reply deeply moved. "If I don't trust you I would not have played with my honour."

At last Bi Darogan had her *nikah* in the presence of the elite of the *mohalla* and Rajju Mian became Roshan's father in place of Mirza.

It is difficult to imagine the whole situation. Tearing the curtain apart from the face of time I find that Bi Darogan has become a bride a second time without any fanfare and twelve-year old Roshan who partly understands and partly misunderstands what is going on before his eyes, is sitting in wonderment in a corner of the room. No bridal songs, no bridesmaids, no gaiety and no wedding atmosphere. It is only a lifeless and sedate bazaar-like setting in which among a few old and not so young

yawning women, Bi Darogan pulls her veil down to her feet.

The Qazi of the town sitting in the male apartment declaims: "I bear testimony that I offer you in *nikah* Janab Mirza Karamat Baig's widow, Islambi by name, at the instance of Abdul Sattar Saheb, two witnesses bearing testimony to it; the wedding *mehar* being five hundred rupees in legal tender. Do you accept her?"

Bi Darogan three times repeated the customary lines along with Rajju Mian . . . "I accept you in my *nikah*."

Outside, they flung sugar candy and dried dates in the air for which young and old made a scramble, even the guests joining them.

Nobody knows after this customary *nikah* how the customary first night passed.

Then the guests slowly departed, first the male and then the female guests wearing *burquas*, through the front door, and the veiled ones and the *salwar*-clad, carrying children, through the back door. The children who had collected around the petromax lamp slowly disappeared in the distant darkness and then Roshan who had been lying in a corner fell asleep.

The thirty-seven year old bridegroom, Rajju Mian, wearing new clothes, unobtrusively, came and stood by the side of Bi Darogan. Perhaps he gave a pale, wan smile or perhaps his demeanour had remained suavely grave. There was no formal parting of the bride from her people. That night was in no manner different from other nights.

Bi Darogan had not cast off her *mehzar*. She was sitting with her face covered. Perhaps tears were running down her cheeks or perhaps she was laughing within herself over this event of her life.

Oh, how my imagination has run riot! There must really be something wrong with me that I should give this unholy twist to such a serious thing as a *fateha*.

The stir and excitement in Bastar those days when the famous uprising took place was akin to a stampede that follows a house on fire while the inmates are caught asleep inside. Everywhere people were in the grip of panic and everyone, young or old, man or woman, was trying to get away from what seemed impending catastrophe. "Let's clear off from here in time," was on everybody's lips.

May Allah not make anybody witness to such calamitous

days—not even one's worst enemies. The year 1910 had descended upon Bastar like doomsday in which thousands of people had died a dog's death. It was a terrible rising in which a handful of inhabitants of Bastar, semi-named, famished and armed with only bows and arrows had brought the British administration to its knees.

In no time, like jungle fire, the rebellion spread from one corner of Bastar to the other. Even today people remember that the rising had been master-minded by the youths of the *ghotuls*. Despite difficulties of communication the news of the uprising would travel overnight to remote villages of the region. The symbol of the uprising was a red chilli tied to a small mango branch, which passing from hand to hand, reached every hamlet.

It was like the sudden outburst of lava which had remained dormant for years and had now engulfed everything in its downward sweep.

In this holocaust, government servants were slaughtered as and where they were found.

A council of war of the elders was held at the slope of a hill or in the remote jungle. The captured government servants tied in rows to tree trunks were, turn by turn, awarded their punishment.

As an accused's turn came his crime was announced before the council.

Name (not necessary). Duty: revenue assistant. Did not allot land for cultivation. Ficted many from their lands and deprived them of their legitimate means of livelihood. Must have gifts of fowl, goat and liquor everyday.

Verdict: The fingers which wrote the words that spelt ruin for the poor tiller should be crushed with stone and the mouth that savoured free mutton, fowl and liquor be filled with cow-dung.

Name (not necessary) : Job : forest ranger, (Does the forest belong to your father ?) What gives you the authority to command : cut down this tree, spare that tree, have fuelwood from this area not that ? If you take it from the prohibited area you'll be heavily fined. Tell the rascal the meaning of fine.

Third accused (name not necessary) job : police Inspector. Caught while escaping from the police station for dear life. Dragged down to this place with tied hands and feet as a result

of which his body is badly lacerated. Regards the village people as no better than cattle takes free work from them. Was fun for him to flog people. Every village he visited had to place two young girls at his disposal for his pleasure.

Ch r r r r...

Placing the point of an arrow on his chest his shirt is torn down the middle. On the point of fainting the Inspector is hardly conscious of what is happening to him.

Kuch! His genitals are cut off with a sharp knife and thrown in front of him, his blood sprouting in a thick stream over the earth. The unfortunate Inspector screams like a goat under the butcher's knife.

In this turmoil one more section of the community consisting of small traders and petty shop-keepers came to grief.

The village bazaar has just settled down to its daily business when the rebels mount an attack. In the twinkling of an eye they plunder the shops. People flee in fear and within minutes the bazaar wears a deserted look. Those offering resistance are immediately done to death. Others slink away in terror and go into hiding. For weeks no one is seen on the road or in the lanes except the rebels who move about armed with bows and arrows.

Rajju was stunned on hearing the news. His mouth fell open with fright and his heart started pounding hard. He was in Raipur when he first got the news and was so un-nerved that he immediately decided to cut short his stay and return home. Throughout the journey he remained fear stricken and kept praying for the safety of Bi Darogan and Roshan.

As he came within sight of his house his mind suddenly went blank. His house was locked.

With a sinking heart, he knocked on a neighbour's door. "Have you any idea where they are gone?"

When fully convinced that it was not one of the rebels but Rajju Mian, the neighbour cautiously opened the door a wee bit and heaving a sigh spoke through the chink, "I wish I could tell you."

"Why, what happened?" stepping upto the woman he asked in alarm. "Tell me, what happened. Why don't you speak?"

"Thank God I'm still alive to tell you the tale. When did you go to Raipur?"

“About seven-eight days ago.” Rajju Mian held his breath.

The woman kept thinking for a while with lowered head. “The day after you left she went to the bazaar and has not returned till now. Oh, I feel so scared. One can never trust these boors. They can be upto anything. It’s only God that saved me. The police is here in full strength and yet no one dares to stir out.”

Rajju Mian lost his patience. He wanted to pull up the woman for being so un-imaginative and callous.

“Why did she go to the bazaar under such appalling conditions?” he asked.

“*Bhaiya*, who knew rioting would start so suddenly? Luckily, she stopped but...”

“Have the others who had gone with her returned?” He interrupted her in his anxiety to get at the facts. He had already realised that there was no point in wasting his time on this woman. He was not even keen to hear her reply for he knew that she would be wide of the mark. While turning back from the door he was told that two or three people had returned but that there was no news of others.

Black clouds were hanging low in the sky and lightning flashed every now and then. As Rajju Mian regained the road the wind rose followed by a heavy storm, which let lose its fury, shaking the town to its roots. The lamp-post standing at the edge of Moti Talab crashed to the ground and the *kadam* tree in front of the mosque kept striking against the wall.

Walking in the rain without the protection of an umbrella, Rajju Mian proceeded towards Roshan’s hostel hoping that he might be able to get some news of his mother from him. He had been living in the school hostel for the past three years or so. After Mirza’s death Bi Darogan had often to go out to attend to business and in her absence from home Roshan’s education suffered. So she had had to put him in the hostel. In the beginning Roshan was adamant and he created a scene on the day he was taken to the hostel for admission. But the parents had to harden their hearts in Roshan’s own interest. They had seen a remarkable change in the boy’s behaviour after their *nikah*. He had lost his original vivacity and his love for them had also cooled down. He would keep aloof from them, mostly absorbed in his own thoughts.

Rajju Mian had often observed that Bi Darogan felt uncomfortable in Roshan's presence as if she was feeling guilty of having committed some sin. He had himself felt the same way sometimes. One day Bi Darogan said, "You must have yourself marked that these days Roshan remains very thoughtful. He doesn't go out to play like other children and keeps to himself most of the time. He only speaks when spoken to. Otherwise he sits in a corner like a sick man and keeps gaping at you."

Rajju Mian felt that he himself had more grouses against his step son than against Bi Darogan. The boy made it a point to avoid Rajju Mian and sometimes even behaved impertinently with him. If Rajju Mian was hard on him, he would lose his temper and stalk out of the house stamping his feet.

Rajju Mian would generally refrain from contradicting Bi Darogan. "He is still a child," he would say. "You mustn't mind his lapses."

"Yes, he is a child and that is why I feel so concerned," she would reply. "Maybe he has taken our *nikah* to heart. Perhaps we didn't do the right thing. Or did we?"

"Don't be a fool. He is too young to understand the implications of such things. Some children are quiet by nature."

Rajju Mian tried to make light of the whole thing but he knew in his heart that what he had said was a lie. If someone looked hard at him his tongue would falter as if his mask was off, revealing his inner mind.

He had only to cross the nullah to reach the school hostel.

There downpour had been heavy and the level of the water in the nullah had risen. It was still raining, the downpour settling into a slow persistent drizzle. The children living in the vicinity of the boarding house had come out and were floating paper boats in the nullah. A child was sitting on the edge of the nullah, dangling his legs in the swiftly flowing current. A female voice warned him in shrill command.

Plodding across the boarding house compound, as Rajju Mian reached the main building, he tried to recall the number of Roshan's room. He had been there only once—at the time of admitting Roshan into the boarding house. And now he had come a second time.

"Are you looking for Roshan?" a boy approached him.

"Yes, where's his room?"

“Come, I’ll show you.”

The boy led him towards Roshan’s room, his shod feet striking against the hard verandah floor. He wondered how Roshan would receive him.

Good that the boy went away, leaving him outside Roshan’s room. Rajju Mian stopped outside the door and rising on his heels peeped into the room through the glass pane in the door. It was a small room holding a chair and a table with books and note books scattered over it. There was a tin trunk lying in a corner and a few dirty clothes hung from a wooden peg. Roshan was sitting on the cot...

With the swiftness of lightning Rajju Mian moved his gaze from the glass pane. He wanted to go away but changed his mind, and looking cautiously around, again peeped into the room through the glass pane.

As if he had been caught red handed stealing in a crowd, Rajju Mian stood there, looking embarrassed. First he thought of knocking on the door and calling out Roshan’s name. But then he tip toed down the stairs.

After many days the fury of the holocaust abated and the situation reverted to normal.

One morning, to his utter surprise, Rajju Mian saw Bi Darogan standing before him as if she had emerged from nowhere. Rajju Mian had passed these days in great mental agony. He was not living, he was just existing, spending most of his time lying in the cot, face down and despairing of Bi Darogan who, he thought would never return. On suddenly seeing her standing before him as a physical reality he felt shaken out of his wits. He kept gaping at her for some time and then he ran forward like mad and hugged her.

Perhaps Bi herself was sceptical that she was made of flesh and blood; that her being back was nothing short of a miracle. Slowly she narrated to Rajju Mian how she had coped with the situation when the trouble started and had spent every minute in mortal fear. It was perhaps the fruit of her past good deeds that she had escaped death.

Rajju Mian also narrated at length how he had fared during this period of turmoil, how he had tried to trace her in the thick of the trouble and had ultimately given up all hope of finding her.

"How is Roshan?" Bi Darogan asked in a faint voice.

For a moment it set Rajju Mian thinking. What should he tell her? True, he was himself keen to talk at length about the boy and had even decided what he would tell her about him. But the truth was that he had not been able to induce himself to visit him a second time. Once he had even started for the boarding house but had retraced his steps when only half way through.

"You haven't told me how Roshan is?"

"He is all right," Rajju Mian replied.

"Did you visit him regularly?"

"No, I only went once or twice. But I could not meet him. You know, of course, Rajju Mian gave a thin smile and fixing his eyes on Bi's face said, "in your absence Roshan did not care to come home even once."

"Why?"

"How do I know? There must be some reason." Rajju Mian lowered his head and forced a smile. "His mother was not present. What would he have done here? The truth is, I mean nothing to him."

Bi Darogan's face fell. "How do you say you mean nothing to him?" she put on a thin smile. "He is still a child and his mind must be in play. But that does not mean that there are no ties holding you two together."

Without making a reply, Rajju Mian walked into the kitchen for a drink of water.

Bi Darogan kept looking towards the kitchen. Then she got up and started arranging her things. Was it a fact that Roshan had not visited the house even once during her absence? The entire region had been in the grip of violence and she had been away from home for over a month running for dear life. Thousands of people had lost their lives and even neighbours had condoled with the aggrieved families. But not Roshan, even though he was a part of the family, being a son. He had remained indifferent to their fate.

Rajju Mian said, "What irked me most was that though Roshan came to the *mohalla* almost every day to enquire about you he never took the trouble to look me up although it only meant walking a few extra steps to reach the house."

The storm raging within Bi Darogan suddenly seemed to

have broken its bounds. Her eyes brimmed with tears. She sat down on the ground and said in a burred voice, "I apologise on his behalf. He is foolish. Don't take it to heart."

The next morning Rajju Mian was still in bed when he heard Roshan's voice. Bi Darogan was cleaning the utensils. Pushing away the utensils she ran upto the door. "Come, son," she said in voice charged with emotion. "I see so little of you, as if you had turned alien."

Rajju Mian enthusiastically got out of bed and came out coughing. He threw a casual glance in their direction and saw mother and son looking lovingly at each other. "You look so thin," he heard Bi Darogan remarking to her son. Rajju Mian felt that he was an intruder and would have done well to stay back in his room. He was retreating towards the bathroom when Roshan got up and observing the proper decorum, paid him his respects. Rajju Mian's anger suddenly vanished.

"When did you come, son?" he asked in a faltering voice.

"Just now."

"You're all right, son?"

Rajju Mian's eyes were critically fixed on Roshan's face. He particularly noticed that the boy's face lacked the healthy colour which one normally finds on the face of an unmarried boy of his age. His cheekbones stood out and there were dark circles under his eyes. He looked sickly, listless and withdrawn. Rajju Mian wondered why it had not struck him before that now Roshan was fast leaving his adolescence behind. Where was that small boy gone whom, many years ago, he used to take out for a ride on his horse? He was now about eighteen years of age, tall, fairer than before and having the hint of an incipient beard.

Suddenly he remembered that day at the boarding house. He had seen something unholy there and wished that he had not been witness to it. Lowering his head, he disappeared into the bathroom.

At night, before going to bed, after some small talk, he came to the point. "I think it is time we married off Roshan," he said in a slow deliberate voice. "He has had enough of education—enough to earn him a livelihood."

Bi who was lying by Rajju Mian's side suddenly sat up. "Why this sudden thought of his marriage?" she asked.

"What's so sudden about it? The boy is now young and also mature enough to be married. He should be put on the straight path before he falls into bad company."

Bi started laughing. "He has shot up like a bamboo," she said. "Is that what makes you think that he is old enough to be married? He is not even twenty yet."

"You're a mother, that's why you speak in that vein," Rajju Mian said, as if rounding off the discussion. But everyday he kept dropping discreet hints. At last one day Bi said, "All right, let's get him married. But we must find a suitable girl. Have you any particular girl in mind?"

"Yes, I know of a suitable girl. That's why I have been broaching this subject. You know Ali Amir?"

"The one who is a court clerk at. . ."

"Yes, the same. Formerly, he was an important functionary at the royal court. Highly pedigreed and a thorough gentleman. I often visit him. May I tell you what's on my mind? Since the day I've seen his daughter I cannot get her out of my mind. I wish to have her as Roshan's bride."

"Is she really that beautiful?"

"When you set eyes on her they will pop out of their sockets," Rajju Mian laughed. "But I'm afraid of throwing a feeler. They are influential people, very much superior to us in status. They may not agree."

"Let them not, for all I care. Let them keep her cooped up in their house. We are not inferior to them in any way. Roshan is Mirza Daroga's son."

"And if he had been my son?" Rajju Mian smiled and cast a searching look at Bi Darogan. For a moment, Bi Darogan was numb with surprise but she quickly regained her composure.

"What difference would it have made?" she said. "If it is not Ali Amir's daughter it could be Akbar Faquir's daughter. My son, Roshan, will not lack a wife."

Rajju Mian started laughing.

What was said in jest actually happened ultimately. Within a year Roshan's name was removed from the school's roll. For six months Bi Darogan wore off the soles of her chappals, tramping her way to and from Ali Amir's house. After a great deal of reluctance and supercilious not the initial engagement took

place and then the marriage. Thus one day Amir's daughter entered Bi Darogan's house as Roshan's bride.

She was Junior Aunt.

THE whole thing is still vivid in my mind as if it had happened just now and not in the days gone by.

The Rajju I had seen a few days ago was not the same man I had known before, he could have been some other man. The body of a sixty-five or seventy year old man, slightly bent due to its height but still firm and hard, clad in a coarse, white *shaluka* and a seven-yard long dhoti ending a little above the knees, closecropped graying hair, a well-trimmed salt-and-pepper beard and eyes the colour of smoke which were always straining to stay open. At first glance one could not have taken him for a Muslim.

Till the last day of his life he visited our house regularly;

on no day did he miss his morning or evening tea. He came pat at tea time, striking his stick on the ground and calling Amma's name while still at the door. Amma would get up promptly, leaving her chores unfinished and go to the door. "Come in, Mamu."

Walking with deliberate, measured steps, Rajju Mian would settle down in his customary chair and indulge in small talk, waiting for the tea to arrive. His talk, whatever twists and turns it took always ended on one note—that modern life was fast leading the world towards destruction. Gone were the good people of the old days and gone were their laudable customs. There was no sense of morality among old or young. Result: sin was on the increase. And the irony of it was that in spite of the quest for pleasure no one seemed to be happy. The cinema had come to stay and there were boys and girls with new fangled ideas who blindly aped what they saw on the screen.

"Are you listening, *Bahu*?" he would try to catch Amma's ear. "I'm a doddering old man. The house says, 'go', the grave says, 'come'. But what is this thing they call the cinema? I wish I knew. God knows what has possessed these people's minds. When I hear those songs I plug my ears with my fingers. May God have mercy on them. What's this thing that they call 'lelun' (nylon). It must have sprouted from the cinema. And look at the fun. The other day Rubina said to me, "Grandpa, please buy me a 'lelun' *chunri*." I said, "Do you want to bring the cinema right into your house? And do you know what Mohsin said in reply? He said that the craze for this thing had caught on and every girl loved to wear it. Today's girls be damned, I said. Do you want to follow their example?" Do you want your sisters to dance in the bazaar?"

Amma would, very wisely, pretend to agree with Rajju Mian's views which only made Sophia and myself laugh. Sometimes we would tease him just out of fun. "Grandpa, how is it that even at your age all your teeth are intact?" I would ask. "And you don't even wear glasses. Do you know of any secret tonic?"

This was his most vulnerable point. "No son, no tonic has anything to do with it," he would tell us. "It's my old bones made of the good food I have eaten all these years. These bones are serving me well in my old age. If I had followed your ways.

I would have gone to pot long ago. *Arre*, in this Dalda age what does one get to eat? Our government believes in duplicity and so do the people. They are all show-offs. The kind of ghee and milk we had in our times you can't think of them even in your dream. One feels like crying at the sight of today's youth. Even in their youth they seem to be going to pieces. Of course, they are great at enjoying film songs."

Sophia would give me an amused look. "Grandpa, in that case I don't think you have any liking for tea."

Rajju Mian would think for a while and then come out with a reply, "Yes, son, I did not fancy tea before. In fact I had no need for it. But of late I have come to have such a strong liking for it that I can't do without it. Only the other day I had to skip tea. I went to sleep as usual but I woke up at midnight feeling utterly miserable. I felt as if someone was striking at my head with a hammer. A couple of days ago I had seen a man inflating his cycle tyre. Then he sat down holding his head between his hands. I learnt that he had kicked the bucket soon after. People told me that he had been suffering from high blood pressure. This must be some new kind of disease. I was reminded of that man. Something similar could happen to me and I felt scared. What is false for you is true for me. I got out of bed and boiled some tea with a slice of ginger added to it. It acted like magic. My headache was gone."

We often had fun at his cost but that did not stop Rajju Mian from visiting our house. In fact Amma had a soft corner for him. After Abba's death it had become second nature with her to be indulgent to aged people. She never turned away an old faquir from her door without giving him alms. Sometimes she was over generous so that the beggar was profuse with his blessings to the point of embarrassment.

Out of deference to Amma we did not discourage Rajju Mian from visiting our house, although he wasted a good deal of our time with his boring talk, specially after what had happened on that day...

I had come home on vacation. Our ration was exhausted and Abba was getting restive. "Every month you buy sixty or seventy rupees worth of ration from the bania's shop and yet you cannot tide over the month with it," he fumed. "You want soap four times a day, two seers of ghee, four seers of edible oil

and ten seers of sugar. I say, what's going on here? It's veritable loot. You know you've a fool in the house to dance attendance on you. So why should you care? Won't someone tell me where ten seers of sugar disappear? Do they go down the drain?"

Since preparing tea and snacks was Sophia's responsibility she said, "Abba, why do you forget that apart from us, we have also visitors dropping in every day? and for each load word goes in that they must be served tea. There are your friends and there are Bhaiyya's friends. And then Amma too has relations visiting her."

Amma was incensed at her name being dragged in. "How many of my people come to see me?" she asked. "And how many of them are served tea? Yes, an old uncle who has his legs in the grave does visit me. But he is not going to last. He may pop off any day."

Abba said, "Young or old is beside the point. A pitcher fills drop by drop."

Amma was deeply hurt and started crying. She had sacrificed her entire life for the family and yet she had no right even to offer a cup of tea to a relative. "May such a life be reduced to dust!"

Finding the discussion taking a different turn, Abba beat his head in despair. We tried to pacify Amma but she did not touch food for two days. She was offered tea, but she refused it, saying, that she had not seen anyone dying for want of tea. True, a pitcher filled drop by drop.

Sophia was equally bitter about it. She sat in a corner and sulked. We all kept seething with anger till one morning the volcano burst.

It was early morning. Amma was in the bathroom. The maidservant was standing near the tap while I was sitting on the plinth waiting for my bath water to boil. A scrapper in hand, Abba was tending the jasmine bush. Suddenly, Amma emerged from the bathroom, her sari carelessly thrown over her body. She complained that a lot of leaves from the overhanging tamarind tree fell over the bathroom floor rendering it slippery. One could slip over it and break his bones. When one could not get even two square meals a day—not even a cup of tea, where was the money to come from for mending broken bones?

The jibe had a specific target. But Abba refused to be provoked. He kept tending the flowerbed with his scraper. Then Amma started throwing things about. Abba stopped working and walking up to Amma asked her in a steady voice, "What do you want? Tell me. I'm fed up with these daily bickerings. Yes, tell me, what's this racket about?"

Finding Abba in an ugly mood Amma, for an instant lost her nerve but not her tongue. "Who's creating this racket? I or you? You think nothing of humiliating me before my own children. And they are all grown-ups..."

She broke down in the middle of her sentence and reached her hand for the *palla* of her sari. "And only for a cup of tea."

Abba glared at her and then said in a hard voice, "You are getting on in years and yet as far as sense goes you are still... I wonder if sense will ever dawn upon you. Have you ever considered how I manage such a large family on hundred and fifty rupees a month? If I say something out of anger must you take it to heart? Have I no right to pull you up?" You want that I should just go round and round like a blinkered bullock and earn for you?"

"Who denies that you are the bread-winner of the family? You feed the family and you have a right over me. It is not still too late to whip me though I have got on in years. The whip will put some sense into my head and make you happy."

Abba shook with rage at her jibe and slapped his cheeks like *rotis*. "I'm a bastard, I'm a pig, I'm a good for nothing drone!" he cried.

Rajju Mian may not have been the cause of this squabble but since Amma had made an issue of it, all the people in the house had started deriding Rajju Mian. Even otherwise they did not like him visiting their house so regularly, he had become a burden.

Usually, when he came, all others except Amma avoided him. Even Sophia, after handing him his cup of tea disappeared into her room, like the others. But that day when he came, all the members of the family assembled in his presence. Even Sophia who liked him the least, looked sympathetic. If looks could provide solace he would have certainly derived it from Sophia.

Rajju Mian was crying like a child.

"Mamu (uncle) it does not behove you to cry like this," Amma said, with tears in her eyes "Women cry in this manner, not men. When a man cries it's like the end of the world."

"Today Mohsin beat me," Rajju Mian said between sobs. "Did I bring him up so that he should beat me in my old age? See, what he has done to me!"

I really felt bad about what I heard and saw. Mohsin was a cousin from my aunt's side, three or four years older than me. But I felt so angry at his outrageous behaviour that if I had chanced upon him at that time I would have hit him. There was no gallantry in beating a man of seventy, specially a man who had brought him up from childhood and made a man out of him under the most trying conditions.

I have known Mohsin from the days when we were studying together in the primary school. One day out of sheer bravado he had plunged a small pair of scissors into a class-mate's neck. The boy happened to be the son of a bigshot of the locality and a hush had fallen over the class as they saw blood dripping from the boy's neck. First Mohsin received a sound thrashing from his class teacher and then he came in for the head master's attention. The matter did not end there. He was subsequently turned out of the school, carrying the stigma that one day he would end up as a murderer.

By the time he reached middle school many small incidents had come to be linked with his name. He made plans in my presence to beat up boys and had even tried to force me to join hands with him in his mad escapades. To tell the truth, I was secretly scared of him. He could be so reckless. He was hefty and had guts. I could be no match to him even if I dared.

In the evening he would go to the maidan near Moti Talab carrying a thick rope. He would lasso a horse, of which there were many in the maidan at that time, and gallop away, jumping on its bare back. Standing on the edge of the tank I would clap my hands excitedly and exclaim, "Faster! Mohsin Bhai, faster!"

Not that I did not want to share in his fun. But my weak and delicate body always proved a handicap. But one evening I could not resist temptation. "Mohsin Bhai," I said, "I want to ride a horse. Do help me."

"You want to ride a horse? Do you, really? Then come."

He thumped the flank of a horse. The horse pranced and neighed loudly. Picking up courage I came closer to the horse and then my nerve failed me. I had never had the thrilling experience of riding a horse. Mohsin first taunted me for being a coward and then coaxed me to shed my fear. His trick seemed to have worked, for soon I found myself seated on the horse's back. "Mohsin Ehai," I said in a frightened voice, "are you sure the horse will not run away with me?"

In reply, Mohsin just laughed and struck his stick against the horse's flank. Before I could properly secure myself on the animal's back, it had broke into a gallop. As the horse raced I kept jumping two feet high from its back. Then the horse suddenly stopped and raising its hind legs gave me a jolt so that sliding over its back I fell down in front of it. I don't remember what happened after that. I learnt later that after leaving a faint hoof mark on my back the horse had bolted.

It was such a horrible experience that afterwards I could not come to terms with Mohsin although during our school days he made many overtures to make a truce.

One summer afternoon in the course of our vacation Mohsin came to me and invited me to go with him to the Amrai (mango grove). "We shall eat mangoes to our fill and come back with our pockets bulging with them," he said.

Then he made another suggestion. "Care to have a game of hockey?" he asked. "We shall fashion hockey sticks of our own."

"How?"

"Five mango trees and twenty-five jamun trees."

I knew the place he was referring to. At the far end of Dalpat Lake there is a cluster of five mango and twenty-five jamun trees which is popularly known as Kubri Katna. In those days boys of a certain community used to visit that place to cut down the branches of these trees. I was fond of playing hockey but not having a hockey stick which I could not afford to buy I was tempted to fall in with Mohsin's proposal. But on second thought I turned it down.

It was in those days that I had seen Rajju Mian looking harried and flustered, as he tried to keep track of Mohsin who loafed around all over the place. He would be seen searching for him in the hockey field or questioning a teacher about him

in the school compound, or going about the bazaar in quest of him. What was worrying the old man was that the boy had been missing from home for many days. He had also not been attending school and had squandered his fees instead of depositing them with the school. He had then gone into hiding for fear of being beaten.

"Son, have you seen him anywhere?" This was his stock question whenever he met me! "You are his cousin and study with him in the same school. You must know all his haunts."

What could I tell him? What Rajju Mian said was true and yet not quite true. I was supposed to know everything about Mohsin for we were cousins and were studying together. But the fact was that I seldom met him. Sometimes I even forgot that he was in the same school with me. Curiously enough, whenever I thought of Mohsin my mind inevitably went back to Rajju Mian and then to Roshan Uncle.

To beat an old man and Mohsin's grandfather at that—I was appalled at the very thought of it. Whatever the provocation, I refused to believe that a person could stoop so low as to beat an old man. Blood, as they say is thicker than water and besides, there is something called humanity.

That evening I went to see Junior Aunt.

The same house, the same courtyard, the same *neem* standing in the middle of it, the same people and the same eerie atmosphere where everything seemed to be going to pot.

Junior Aunt was slowly sweeping the courtyard under the *neem* tree, the broom making a grating sound against the floor. Rubina was not at home and Bhabi was in the kitchen. It was a summer evening when under the vaulting sky darkness was struggling to take over from the evening twilight. The sky hung over us like a crisp and smooth blue sheet of paper, flecked with white fluffy clouds looking like raw cotton stuck there by clumsy hands.

I sat down on the proffered mat and idly watched Junior Aunt at work. After offering me a seat she had picked up her broom and resumed sweeping the floor.

Everything was the same as it used to be many years before. Only the bamboos under the tiled roof had become black and hollow with smoke and smelly dampness. In some places they had rotted and were on the point of crumbling down. But

nobody had thought of replacing them. Everything looked old and decayed—a mouldy agedness slowly disintegrating into nothingness.

“Aunt, whose house is that?” I pointed at a house that had newly come up in the neighbourhood. Its walls had risen far higher than ours and its ochre-coloured tiled roof was still without a stain on it.

“Oh, you mean that house?” Aunt straightened up, her hands limply hanging by her sides. “Don’t you know that man? Someone by the name of Shukla. He had a *paan-biri* shop in the bazaar. In no time he bought some land and constructed a house on it. Now he is a rich man.”

She stood there looking at the house with vacant eyes. Was what she had said tinged with jealousy? I searched my own heart.

Whenever I came here on vacation and went round the town I noticed startling changes. It was a common sight to see an old house crumbling down and a new one coming up by its side. It was my own town and yet it appeared alien to me. I feared that if I came here after a long absence I may even fail to recognise the place.

“It looks as if this place is more hospitable to outsiders,” once Aunt had remarked. “They come as paupers, carrying a length of string and a *lota* and become rich overnight. And as for us, our bodies remain shorn of clothes...”

Amma gives vent to similar thoughts and so does Abba. I also repeat such sentiments parrot-like even though I am conscious of the fact that it is man’s own perseverance, enterprise and intelligence that take him far in life. Those people who suspect dishonesty in every new house, in every new car or in a beautiful woman’s favour are no better than fools.

“Did your Uncle visit you?” Junior Aunt asked after she had finished sweeping the courtyard. She bent backwards to straighten her back, threw the broom in a corner and raising her sari a little sat down on the plinth.

“Did he say anything?” she asked again on not getting a response from me.

“Where’s Mohsin these days?” I parried her question by putting one of my own and then looked away. Aunt was silent for a while. Then she took a long breath and said, “I wish

I knew. If I had known, things would not have come to such a pass."

"Aunt, what's really the matter?" I asked in an emphatic tone. "What's gone wrong with Mohsin? He does not even desist from beating old men."

The leaves of the *neem* tree started rustling although there was no breeze and the bitter smell of the leaves and its fruit pervaded the courtyard.

Near the unpaved drain of the bathroom a couple of grey-necked ducks started cackling. The cock of the house standing at the other end of the plinth fluttered its wings and crowed in a raucous, mechanical voice.

"Oh!" Aunt shooed it away and then waving her hand tried to drive away the ducks. Then she lapsed into silence giving the impression that in this house it was a common place to beat aged people.

"Amma, just look here!" it was Bhabi's plaintive voice come from inside the kitchen. But Aunt took no notice of it.

"Do you know your maternal uncle has separated from us?"

"No, I didn't know that," I looked at her startled. "Do you mean...?"

"Now he lives separately from us, runs his own kitchen. He has completely cut himself off from us."

"Since when?"

"It happened quite some time back. Must be two months ago. He comes to your house quite often, as I hear. Didn't he tell you anything about it?"

Recently Amma had vaguely hinted at some such thing but I had never bothered to know what it was all about. The kind of life Rajju Mian had led just for the sake of his people, had always had a false ring about it. I thought blood ties should generate a different kind of warmth.

"Just think of it, in this house I became the mother of so many children. I had sons, daughters, daughters-in-law and grandchildren. But still I'm a suspect. They all think I'm the culprit. No one tries to probe your Uncle under his skin. If I try to tell the truth they muzzle me. If only you knew the truth. To all appearances I am his wife but what canards he talks."

"Aunt, stop beating about the bush." I said impatiently. "Tell me what actually happened. It all sounds like a mystery

to me." Her roundabout talk had started getting on my nerves.

"*Arre*, what's there to tell? I know it the hard way that widowhood is a curse. If the roof is whisked away from over your head your protection against sun and rain is gone. Tell me, what am I to do? My son does not talk civilly to me and his wife is vain. Now if a good man comes to meet me should I show him the door?"

It was getting darker, making Aunt's face hazy. The *neem* leaves had stopped rustling but the ducklings were still waddling about. The wind from Moti Talab had fallen. I felt suffocated.

"Cry! Cry louder!" In the kitchen Bhabi had slapped her child. Perhaps he was now sprawling on the ground, throwing about his legs and crying.

Junior Aunt threw an indifferent glance towards the kitchen and got up with an "Oh!", placing her hands on her knees. Then she slowly walked to the kitchen and returned holding a lantern in one hand and the child at her hip. She sat down on the plinth.

The lantern resting in front of her took the *neem* tree from the root upwards in its arc of light. A large number of herons had together descended upon the tank. Near the unpaved drain some insect had started trilling on a shrill note. . . chek. . .chee chik!

"They have all of them turned against me," Junior Aunt said, picking up the thread of her talk. "They said I was playing dirty with them. They said as long as the old woman and Roshan were there I had willy nilly to keep up appearances. But now I have nobody to fear. But Allah is above us. He sees everything. I say torture me, do your worst." She paused for a while and then continued, "I swear I've not played foul with anyone. May I rot if I have. If there's nothing to eat in the house can I produce it by magic? Forget about me, but sometimes even the children go to sleep on empty stomachs."

That suddenly reminded me. Rajju Mian was very fond of good food. He was almost a hedonist in this respect. When the first vegetable of the season arrived in the market, he would hurry to our house, bringing us the good news. "Are you listening, Bahu? Fresh ladies fingers have just arrived. The season's first arrival! And their is *kanwala saag* too. There was

such a stampede for it that I could not lay my hand on it. I could just manage four pick worth of it—and here it is! If it is no trouble cook it for me while you are cooking your own things. . .”

“Since these Dandakaranya Bengalees have descended upon this place fish has completely vanished from the market. Even rotten fish is selling at the rate of good fish. These fish sellers—I tell you, they are an impossible lot. Just to have a glimpse of mogra fish the size of your thumb you have to shellout eight annas. Bahu, if you are interested, I’ll haggle with them and bring them down to something reasonable. Since the old woman’s departure I’ve forgotten the taste of fish. She was very fond of fish.”

It was evident that after all this prompting and gratuitous advice he would establish a right over a part of the food. Sophia did not like it and even objected at times. But Amma always interceded on his behalf. “You shouldn’t mind an old man’s idiosyncracies,” she would say. “If he helps himself to a morsel or two, surely, we are not going to get the poorer for it. His tongue has tasted good things. He longs for them at times.”

How did those with large families cope with starvation—I often wondered. If there had been daylight in place of the dim light of the lantern I would have liked to have a good look at Aunt’s face.

“But if your own gold is impure why blame the goldsmith for it?” Junior Aunt had resumed talking. “If Mohsin had been earning, if only he had understood and shouldered his responsibilities nobody would have dared raise a finger at us. Now they have the impudence to say to my face that with my man gone I’ve started entertaining other men, that I hobnob with them in broad daylight.”

Junior Aunt gave a bitter laugh. She said, “I told them you are my own children. I’ve given birth to all of you. Just consider my age and then think of your allegations could one think of a more grotesque incongruity?”

After that there was nothing more left to be asked. I did not have the heart to ask what lay behind Mohsin’s beating and Rajju’s complaint.

Junior Aunt told me many more things, one of which gave me a severe jolt. In fact it came to me as a revelation. It was like some corners that had remained hidden in darkness, suddenly revealing their contour in the sunlight.

WHEN you think of it, fifteen is really no age. At that age the receding footprints of childhood are still fresh and firm. One has only to turn back and take in one glance the marks and the trail they lead back to. At one end the links with dolls are still intact and at the other, the mind is fast undergoing a transformation. The demands of the body create unknown desires which hover at the threshold for entry.

Junior Aunt was in some such state when she bade good-bye to her virginity.

That evening rain had ceased after many days though the sky was still overcast with dark, threatening clouds. A sharp wind was blowing fitfully, sending shivers down one's spine. The

courtyards, the roads, the brooks with their grassy banks were submerged in water. Frogs were shrilly croaking in the tank.

Struggling with her heavy and unwieldy *mehzar*, as Junior Aunt stepped across the threshold of her new house tears came flooding into her eyes. A lump had formed in her throat, making it difficult for her to breathe. Opening her mouth, she tried to gulp in air to get over her suffocation.

"Anything wrong?" Rajju Mian who was standing behind her testily asked.

"*Aree, Bahu*, take care of your *mehzar*," Bi warned her and then stepping forward lifted the end of Junior Aunt's *mehzar*. It was trailing behind her and was stained with mud.

Too flustered to see properly, Junior Aunt was standing there, flailing her arms in the air in order to manage her *mehzar*, when Bi collected its ends and tucked them between Junior Aunt's hands. Before she could gather them in properly, someone gently nudged her with his elbow. "Walk on. What are you waiting for?" It was Roshan Uncle.

"Where's the sandal paste?" someone cried and caught Junior Aunt's arm from below, asking her to stop. There was utter chaos and people were rushing in and rushing out. At last someone came up, carrying sandal paste in a saucer.

"*Hai, Allah*, what shall I do with this measly amount? Hold it under my nose?" the woman who was given the saucer said in a mocking tone. Bi Darogan who was standing behind the woman stepped forward, seething with rage. "Eh, woman, do you want to bathe in sandal paste? It's just a custom. This amount is enough."

Another woman heartily endorsed Bi Darogan's suggestion and the customary ceremony was gone through without any hitch. The bride and groom's palms were smeared with sandal paste. Roshan Uncle then held Junior Aunt's hand and pressed it against the wall, leaving the impression of her palm upon it.

There was more to follow. They were entering the house when the people of the *mohalla* barred their way and refused to budge till they were given money. But Rajju Mian refused to oblige. He argued that enough was enough and there was no point in shelling out money at every step just because of some silly custom. "Mian, marriage is not a joke. You must have a big heart," someone from among the gathering taunted him. At

last Rajju Mian reluctantly parted with eight annas at which the people ridiculed him, forcing him to add another eight annas, making it a rupee, which ultimately became two rupees.

Junior Aunt was feeling tired and sat bunched up like a ball. The bustle of a house of wedding, the din, heavy new wedding clothes, the *mehzar* and the circle of known and unknown faces. She felt that if this continued for any time more she would be forced to throw all decorum to the wind and prostrate herself on the ground. Thousand mercies that God came to her rescue the nick of time. Two hands supporting her from her shoulders led her in and after some time she was made to sit on a mat in the verandah.

Another rite was gone through. The bride and the bridegroom were made to sit facing each other, a platter full of rice resting between them. The rice was scattered on the mat and each of them was asked to scoop up seven glassfulls from the heap. There followed a scramble for rice between the two, helpers assisting each protagonist. Inroads were made on Roshan Uncle's heap, leaving it severely depleted. As per custom the losing party had to beg for food from the winning party. "My good woman," the women of the bride's party were trying to force Roshan to say, "My children are starving. May I borrow half seer rice from you?"

Aunt's face suddenly became grim and she looked disapprovingly at the women for trotting out such nonsense. But Zohra Bhabi smiled. "Speak the words, Bhaiyya," she prompted Roshan Uncle. "It's all in the game. Don't feel shy."

The request was repeated several times but Uncle was adamant and refused to utter the customary words.

"Let't drop it at that," Bi Darogan at last said, to save the situation. "He does not approve of it."

"What's there to disapprove?" a woman remarked. "It's a ritual marriage and all the rites must be properly observed. The relatives have assembled here to participate in the wedding. Surely, they too have a say in the matter. They lend colour to the function. Why should one pull a long face over it?"

The woman who was conducting the function got up looking crest-fallen and took a back seat. Roshan Uncle got up in a huff and left the place.

A hush fell over the place. The women looked at one

another and then fell to talking in whispers. A woman wearing a green *orhni* pulled her *orhni* across her face in anger. "Hai, Allah!" she exclaimed turning her face towards her neighbour with a jerk.

"If you ask me, instead of going through this farce they should have made it a simple widow-widower affair," Zohra Bhabi said good-humouredly.

Bi Darogan remained discreetly silent. "You know the young men of these days," she said at last.

The women were not appeased. They got up one by one and departed. Bi tried to mollify them. "You shouldn't mind it," she said to the departing women. "I apologise on my son's behalf. Please don't take it amiss." In spite of her importunity no one stayed behind.

"What's this rumpus?" Rajju Mian came shouting from outside. "What are these women annoyed about?"

The rice lay scattered on the mat, a glass tumbler lying upturned over it. Junior Aunt was sitting in a corner looking tired and weary. The house had emptied of guests and visitors. Only Bi Darogan was standing near the plinth, wearing a forlorn look.

Getting no reply, Rajju Mian came into the inner courtyard. "Why don't you speak?", he barked at Bi Darogan. "What's happened?"

Bi started crying and then quietly proceeded towards her room.

"Will nobody tell me?" Rajju Mian cried like a mad man. "Everone whom I ask turns away his face and departs. Tell me, what's happened?"

He shouted at the top of his voice but it created no impression on anybody. Only Junior Aunt trembled under her heavy *mehzar*.

At last stamping his feet in anger Rajju Mian barged out of the house.

"What foolish people! How stupid!"

These were the first words that fell from Uncle Roshan's mouth as he entered Junior Aunt's room on the wedding night and dumped himself on the bedstead. He shot a glance at Junior Aunt who was sitting bundled up on the bed and then proceeded to remove his shoes.

A small room with newly plastered mud walls. It had no opening except a narrow door to let the air and light in. No window no skylight. The door was so low that even in the day the room remained dark and gloomy.

In the dim light of the lantern Junior Aunt looked round the room. It was bare and crudely furnished. A wooden plank had been laid against one wall on which boxes had been arranged in a row and over them one could see a wooden peg fixed into the wall. In an alcove in the opposite wall rested an extinguished clay lamp. From the line of soot going up from the alcove it seemed that the lamp was lighted every night. Alongside the line of soot hung a picture of Baba Tajdin, a divine of Nagpur.

After pushing his shoes under the bed, Roshan Uncle removed his clothes—a *churidar* pajamas, *shervani*, turban and a waistband—and changed into his *tehnet*. Then he proceeded to hang his clothes on the wooden peg. This gave Junior Aunt an opportunity to scrutinise him closely—average height, modest build, wheatish complexion, regular sharp features. But every line of his face spoke of arrogance and hauteur. Perhaps it was to set off their effect to greater advantage that he was sporting a moustache.

“Along with Uncle, Anma has also gone raving mad,” he remarked while hanging his clothes on the peg. “It’s not marriage. They are just making an ass of me.” He laughed. “It’s mug’s game.”

The same thing had happened on the day of the *nikah*. They had unearthed some old and stale customs in the name of marriage. As the marriage party arrived it was confronted with a big bush of *mehdi* by the girl’s people. A high curtain was hung down one side of the bush, where stood Roshan Uncle. He was expected to leap up and pluck the leaves from the overhanging bush. He made one or two half-hearted attempts and then gave up. In the same way they had produced a rose stalk covered with flowers with which they struck the bridegroom. As per custom the bridegroom was required to lunge forward and snatch away the rose stalk before they could strike him with it. Roshan Uncle tried, but in the struggle which was marked by temper, the rose flowers which had been stuck on to

the stalk fell and the thorns pierced Uncle's palm, drawing blood.

"I didn't know your people were such boors," Roshan Uncle said, lying down in bed. "If I had known I wouldn't have married in your family."

Junior Aunt who was sitting there with lowered head suffered Uncle's remarks in silence. In fact she wanted to retaliate but as she looked up she found that Uncle had edged closer to her. There was no sign of arrogance in his face, nor did he look tense. He looked very much at ease and his eyes glowed. She again lowered her head.

The next morning they witnessed something strange.

Her face unwashed, her hair tousled, her eyes swollen, her face drained of expression, Bi Darogan was sitting stiffly on the plinth. Her hands resting against her temples, she was vacantly staring into space. Rajju Mian standing by her side was trying to pacify her. "What's happened," he said. "Must you keep shedding tears over it?"

Tears fell in runnels from Bi Darogan's eyes and she sat there noisily sniffing through her running nose. "May God not bring such days even to enemies," she wailed.

Roshan Uncle, wearing a *tehmet* was sitting near the bathroom, chewing on his toothstick. For sometime he ignored the goings-on between Bi Darogan and Rajju Mian. But when Bi Darogan started cursing her luck and beating her head, Roshan Uncle lost his temper. "What's wrong with you, Ma?" he cried. "Heavens have not fallen that you should wail like this!"

Bi refused to look in his direction. At last she said in a strained voice, "It's nothing, son. You did the right thing. Why lament over it? The fault is mine that I got you married. Now I can't show my face to anyone."

"Who asked you to get me married? Couldn't I have done without it?"

From Roshan Uncle's tone one could feel that things were fast coming to a head. Rajju Mian was clearing his throat to speak when he heard a bullock cart stopping outside the house. And then they saw Junior Aunt's mother accompanied by two women entering through the door.

The squabble suddenly petered out. Roshan Uncle disappeared into the bathroom. Bi Darogan quickly wiped her tears

and got up from the plinth while Rajju Mian slunk away, coughing. The bride's mother had come to fetch her for the Fourth Day ceremony. As was the custom, on waking up in the morning, Junior Aunt had gone to say her salaams to her in-laws. Pulling the veil over her face to the full, first she had bowed over her mother-in-law's feet and then at her father-in-law's.

Rajju Mian was at that time sitting in the verandah puffing away at a *biri*. He felt flustered as the new bride suddenly appeared before him. And then his embarrassment changed into surprise.

Junior Aunt had cast away her *mehzar*; she was only wearing a thin embroidered *orhni*—so thin that one could easily see her face through it though it was serving her as a veil. All he remembered was that she had slowly approached him, bent down at his feet and then stood there as if waiting for something. Even after a minute when Rajju Mian remained silent she became awkwardly conscious of the fact that he had his eyes fixed upon her as if he was trying to size up her body.

Soon after Junior Aunt got into the bullock cart to go to her parent's home but all the time she felt as if Rajju Mian's eyes were still fixed on her body.

It was so unbecoming of him, she thought. There was an age for everything and one must observe certain decorum. In the first place she could not believe it and if she could convince herself that there was really something to it she felt chary of telling it to anybody. Things sometimes boomerang upon you.

Many years ago, when she was a girl of twelve Rajju Mian had visited their house. When she went into the sitting room with a cup of tea for him, Rajju Mian fixed his gaze upon her and asked her father if she was his daughter.

"Yes, my only daughter. I've a son, older than her—and then this girl."

"A lively child. Come to me, daughter. What's your name?"

Junior Aunt had gone to him without showing any hesitation. She told him her name and as long as she stood by his side, she felt his hand lovingly caressing her back.

It was the first and the last time that he had seen her as an unmarried girl. He visited them many a time after that but by then Junior Aunt had taken to the purdah. And now it was after a lapse of many years that he was seeing her on the Fourth

Day of her wedding.

The thing was bristling with so many implications. Junior Aunt just couldn't believe it and all the way home her mind kept teetering between doubt and certainty. She could not even believe that Roshan Uncle would observe such an out-landish custom as the Fourth Day and come post haste to her parental home. What had happened at the wedding ceremonies had left no scope to think otherwise.

When Junior Aunt's mother sent word to Uncle Roshan to visit them Junior Aunt had half a mind to stop the messenger from going. "Amma, if we can do without this custom let us save him the trouble of coming," she wanted to tell her mother. "They are educated people and would take us for yokels."

But she could not bring herself to the point of telling her mother what was passing in her mind. She feared they would think she had a big mouth. People would nudge one another and say, "There goes a real live-wire, if ever there was one!" Secondly, it would require a lot of explaining and she could be misunderstood. It could even lead to something unpleasant.

She was really feeling low. She was just emerging from the bathroom when Baby, a girl of the neighbourhood said excitedly, "Apa, the bridegroom has come!"

Junior Aunt's heart missed a beat. Another kind of doubt assailed her mind. She was on tenterhooks all the time, fearing the worst till to her great relief, he departed in good humour.

Although while sitting on the mat she was sinking under the weight of her *mehzar*, and an arm-length of veil drawn over her lowered face (for even if she inadvertently raised her head Amma or Zahira Bhabi pressed it down), she was dying to know what impression Uncle Roshan had formed about her. Thank God, he had readily agreed to all their requests without creating any fuss.

Between her and Roshan Uncle lay a heap of green leaves on a mat, rose petals strewn over it. Both had been vying with each other to have the bigger share of the flowers to the exclusion of leaves there were many hands helping Junior Aunt to rake in the loot. The hands worked with great dexterity but in the end only leaves and not flowers fell to Junior Aunt's lot.

This was an indicator to what lay in store for her. In her long span of life no roses fell to her lot. Only leaves, withered and decaying.

THE same bullock cart came to take her back after the Fourth Day. But this time Amma did not accompany her. Only two women of the neighbourhood and her neighbour, Baby, had gone with her.

It was evening. The main road leading to her *mohalla* lay deserted. The wind which only a short while ago had been tremulous under the shadows of the Moti Talab maidan was now blowing across the big nullah, making the place cool.

As Junior Aunt got down from the bullock cart she saw the neighbouring houses illuminated with clay lamps. Only her house lay steeped in darkness, looking ghostly, and deserted as if no one lived in it.

Walking slowly, she stopped outside the door to take stock of the situation. An eerie silence greeted her. Was this the house which only the other day was resounding with life? One had to walk across a big verandah, a long corridor and two dark hovel-like rooms to reach the residential part of the building. She regretted having sent the women away. She felt nervous in that pervading darkness. What there was no one in the house Or, if someone saw her standing alone in the dark.

She looked around apprehensively and then impetuously clanged the door chain against the wooden door. After a long wait, during which she clanged the chain many times, Rajju Mian, a *tehmāt* wrapped round his waist and holding a lantern emerged from the house. "Who is there?" he asked peering into the dark.

Junior Aunt felt greatly relieved. If it had been really her house she would have said in an imperious voice, "It's me. Open the door! Why have you kept the place dark?" But she was standing in the door in the capacity of a new bride and although she had been married into this family she was still an alien. She wanted to cough and announce her presence but then she thought that it would not be the right thing to do. She raised her hand, jingling her bangles, so that he should know who was standing outside at the door.

Not catching the hint, Rajju Mian repeated his question and getting no answer, he pushed the door a little more to have a better look.

"Oh, you? *Bahu!*"

This time Junior Aunt coughed to establish her identity. Carefully adjusting her *pallav*, she entered the house.

"Have you come alone?" For an instant he seemed to have forgotten himself.

"No, Baby and two women came with me in the bullock cart. I've been knocking on the door for a long time".

"There is nobody in the house," he said, shielding the wick of the lantern with his palm. "Your mother-in-law has gone to her sister and Roshan has gone out for a walk." he turned to go in.

Junior Aunt got a jolt. She suddenly recalled what had happened in the morning.

"I was resting in the inner room," Rajju Mian said. "Being

alone I saw no point in lighting the lantern." He thought an explanation was called for to account for the delay in opening the door and for keeping the house in darkness.

"And then I told her..." evidently he was alluding to Bi Darogan.... "if you have made up your mind to go you may as well go tomorrow. By then *tahu* would also be here. But she was adamant. She just got up and was gone. Many unsavoury things happened yesterday, I do admit. Roshan too talked a lot of tommy-rot. But such things do happen. It is the way of the world. If one takes such small things to heart how can one carry on in life?"

Coming into the inner verandah, Junior Aunt discarded her *mehzar* and stood still. Rajju Mian bent down to put the lantern on the ground. He glanced at her and then disappeared into the kitchen. Left alone, fear again took hold of her. What a big and frightening house and so lonely, as if it had not been lived in for years. How would she spend her whole life in it all by herself? She thought of her small but open and tidy house. She had not felt frightened in its big courtyard even in the thick of the night. There were not many people living in the house. Only Abba, Amma, brother and later on her sister-in-law. But even when no one was there the house gave the impression of being full. Besides, Abba was very fond of keeping pets. In one corner of the courtyard he had put up a menagerie with a tiled roof where he kept rabbits, guinea pigs, mongoose, parrots and monkeys.

Most of Junior Aunt's time was spent in looking after these pets. She would feed the guinea pigs and rabbits, give chillis to the parrots and teach them to speak, or watch the monkeys at their antics.

On the day of her parting Abba became very sad and said that with her going away these poor pets would become orphans. "Who would now look after them?" he said with a sigh.

Suddenly she heard the rattling of utensils in the kitchen and guessed that Rajju Mian was taking his meal. Then she heard someone blowing into the hearth and soon saw smoke emerging from the kitchen. She proceeded towards the kitchen.

As she had guessed it was her father-in-law blowing into the hearth. A small pot was resting on the hearth.

"Uncle, what are you doing?" As if catching someone just in

time from committing a sin, Junior Aunt planted herself before the hearth.

"It's nothing *Bahu*," Rajju Mian laughed abashedly. "If your mother-in-law is not here does it mean that we are not going to have our food? Roshan said that he wouldn't be having his meal in the evening and I thought that in that case I may as well skip my meal. Now that you've come you must at least have tea if nothing else."

Junior Aunt was deeply touched. What a wrong impression she had formed of such a good man. She suddenly remembered what her Abba had once said—that one should never take a snap decision about a person. One could be wide of the mark. She had wantonly suspected a man her father's age. As if wanting to make amends for the wrong she had done Rajju Mian, she covered her head to show her respect for him. "You leave it to me, Uncle," she said sitting down by the side of the *chulha*. "I'll prepare the tea myself."

Rajju Mian insisted that it was really no trouble but she refused to listen to him. Then she reminded him that till a new bride had served food with her own hand, in keeping with custom, she was not entitled to take charge of the kitchen.

There was no further talk between them. The fuel in the *chulha* crackled as the fire caught on and they sat in silence watching the pale flames.

"*Bahu*, you must overlook what happened yesterday," Rajju Mian at last broke the silence. "It was your mother-in-law's fault. But to tell the truth, she was not to blame either. It's Roshan. He can be so unpredictable. Who can stop women from having their ways at these weddings?"

The fire in the *chulha* had started sinking. Two small logs having burnt down, their embers had slipped out of the *chulha*. Junior Aunt pushed them back after blowing over them. She cast a fleeting glance at her father-in-law who, she felt, had been speaking to her with the simplicity of a child.

"You know your mother-in-law, of course," he said and then realising his mistake added: "I mean that she is not from our community. You are aware of that, I think."

Junior Aunt nodded in affirmation.

"But how would you know? Oh, yes, they must have talked about it at home. So, my daughter, if there is any lapse on her

part you must overlook it. There would be no sense in splitting hair over it."

In fact, Junior Aunt was not listening to him; her mind was elsewhere. When the water started boiling she put tea leaves in the kettle and after giving them some time to brew poured the tea for Rajju Mian. Rajju Mian kept telling her that he was not interested in having tea at that time but she placed the cup in front of him.

"The police came here after you left." Rajju blew on the tea and then poured it into the saucer to cool it. Seeing a glint of fear in Junior Aunt's eyes he said, "For some time past we have been confronted with a new trouble. You must have heard about that murder in the town—a most gruesome murder. Unfortunately, it took place in the house next to ours. That a man could degenerate into such a brute—well, the mind boggles at the very thought of it. They chopped off the body into pieces and threw the pieces away."

"Where?" Junior Aunt asked, alarmed. She had heard that someone had murdered a young man and cutting his body into pieces, had put it into a bag and thrown it into an obsolete well near the Moti Talab. The body remained in the well for many days. But then it got decomposed and its stench filled the air, making it difficult for the people of the *mohalla* to breathe. The well was searched and they took out the dismembered body, piece by piece.

Junior Aunt had seen this deserted well which was located near the tube well. The well looked so wide and terrifying. Small trees had sprung up from its green, moss-covered inner wall and their overgrowing branches had covered the mouth of the well. A couple of years ago when the branches had not spread so much Junior Aunt used to come to the well with her companions to play. There was a cluster of yellow kaners on one side of the well. The oleanders not being high she could easily climb them along with the other girls and swing from their branches. They would pluck flowers from the trees and fill their laps with them.

While chasing each other, their laps bulging with flowers, they would suddenly stop to peep into the well. Then they would throw rocks into the well and run away, just to hear the echoes chasing them.

"May even one's worst enemies be spared such a horrible death," Rajju Mian said. "The scoundrels had cut off the poor fellow's feet, legs, thighs and hands and the torso—it was like a butcher cutting down a goat. Oh, it must have been a ghastly sight."

Junior Aunt's shoulders shook with fear. In her imagination she visualised the dead man's head, legs and hands floating on the green scum-covered water of the well. The oleanders growing on the walls of the well swayed violently and she saw the decimated hands rising from the surface of the scummy water and beckoning her towards them.

A loud, sharp noise.

It appeared to be the sound of an empty tin falling somewhere upstairs. Then she heard the muffled sound of someone walking on the floor.

Sweat broke out on Junior Aunt's forehead. As if her body had become all ears, she tried to listen to the sound. "What's it?" she asked in a shaking voice.

"O, that!" Rajju looked up and smiled. "It must be rats running about in the loft. We have stored some rice there and some useless junk. These rats scurry about all night dislodging things."

But Junior Aunt, it seemed, was not satisfied with the explanation. She thought that Rajju Mian had invented this explanation just to quell her fear. He must be concealing something from her. She recalled people saying that in many houses they harboured ghosts, generally lofts being their secret haunts.

Outside, the lane had become quiet, the trilling of a cricket near the tank further heightening the pervading silence. It got on Junior Aunt's nerves and she feared that if it continued like this for some time more she would even stop breathing. Swallowing hard, she tried to speak when she heard some noise outside the outer door. Rajju Mian quickly got up from his seat. It was Roshan returning from his evening walk.

That he should get up so abruptly seemed rather odd to Junior Aunt. Behind that act seemed to lie a hint of fear as if he had been caught doing something wrong. But what could it be about, Junior Aunt could not decide even though she kept thinking over it a long time. Here everything appeared mysterious to her: the house, its inmates and the manner in which

they reacted to one another.

Roshan lingered in the verandah for a moment and then headed for his room. Junior Aunt kept sitting near the *chulha* for sometime and then she came to her room and found Uncle Roshan changing his clothes.

While taking off his *banian*, he asked in a hard voice, "When did you come?"

"In the evening."

"But I was given to understand you were not coming today." Roshan Uncle fixed his eyes on Junior Aunt's face.

Before going to sleep Junior Aunt picked up courage to ask, "When is Amma coming?"

"Why do you want to know?" Roshan Uncle removed his arm from over his eyes and stared at Junior Aunt.

Junior Aunt fell silent as if she had withdrawn into her shell out of some fear. Then she said in a hesitating voice, "I feel scared when alone in this big house."

Roshan Uncle smiled gravely and placed his hand upon her shoulder as if trying to console her. "There's nothing to fear," he said. "There are others too living in this house."

Again the sound of something falling from the loft. The rats were again at their nightly game.

Bi Darogan came on the third day after Roshan had left for his office. Junior Aunt respectfully said her salaam to her, asked her if she would like to have tea and put water on the *chulha* to heat it for her bath. She danced attendance on her the whole day but all she could get from Bi Darogan was a laconic 'yes' or 'no'.

When it was time for Roshan to return from office Bi Darogan called Junior Aunt to her room. "*Bahu*, did Roshan go to your house on the Fourth Day?" she asked.

"Yes."

"Did he observe all those customs?" Bi gave Junior Aunt a searching look.

When Junior Aunt replied in the affirmative. Bi's face turned livid with anger. "Oh, is that so?" she snapped. "He gloats in spiting at me. Yes, that's what he does. Heaping insults on me. Why should he care? It's a question of in-laws. They command and he obeys. He must do their bidding."

Junior Aunt had not bargained for such unsavoury

comments. But there was no stopping Bi Darogan. She continued: He has picked up some English and thinks no end of himself. He takes pride in calling himself a clerk and driving the quill. God forbid, if he had acquired some more education and become a Tehsildar or a Diwan he would have driven us out of the house."

Junior Aunt listened to her incriminations in silence and when it became too much for her she went into the kitchen.

Perhaps Junior Aunt's life in this new house had to start on some such note. The bitter atmosphere which enveloped her at the age of fifteen stayed with her till the end of her life.

According to the custom of the house she would leave her bed in the morning while it was still dark, sweep the big house from one end to the other, light the *chulha* and then prepare the morning tea and even find time to attend to Bi Darogan. To all appearances, Bi Darogan looked well preserved but she was none too well. Sometimes she complained of pain in her legs and at others in her back. Sometimes it was a splitting headache and at others a severe cold. As a result, right from cooking to washing clothes, cleaning utensils, sweeping and tidying up the rooms and grinding spices everything was entirely Junior Aunt's responsibility.

Father-in-law had to have his cup of tea while it was still dark. Just at the time when she was busy preparing his tea Roshan Uncle would call out to her and this was also the time when Bi Darogan's aches and pains flared up, demanding Junior Aunt's urgent attention. It generally happened that while trying to please one she aroused the wrath of the other.

"Once you turn your back on me you seem to be gone for good," Roshan Uncle would complain.

Seething, Bi Darogan would turn her face towards the wall. "It's all right, Bahu, please yourself," she would grohn, looking, the picture of helplessness. "It's none of your concern whether I live or die."

"Where's my tea?" Rajju Mian would cry from his room. "Are we going without tea this morning? Roshan's mother. How long will you keep me waiting? Must I keep gaping at your face? Since the day Malti went I feel homeless.

In this mad scramble for getting things done, some mishap was bound to occur. The pot of boiling water would slip out of Junior Aunt's hands, a cup or saucer would crash to the ground, a burning log of wood in the *chulha* would throw a spark on her sari.

She kept busy with the breakfast till eight and by ten Roshan had to finish his meal—the appointed time at which he left for the court. Half the afternoon was gone in washing clothes and taking her bath and the rest of the afternoon was spent in attending to other chores till the evening. On returning from the court, Roshan had a cup of tea and then left for his evening walk while Junior Aunt returned to the kitchen to cope again with the daily grind. By the time she had finished she was so tired that she felt as if her body was breaking. Sometimes she would doze off, resting her back against the wall, just to take the ache out of her body.

But in spite of all the attention she paid to Bi Darogan she found it difficult to win her over.

Bi Darogan would leisurely get out of bed, wash her face, drink her tea and then take a leisurely bath lasting half an hour or so, after which she shut herself in her room. Though to all appearances she was Bi Darogan or Islambi, at heart she was still Bitti. She had a picture of the goddess Lakshmi pasted on the inner lid of her wooden box in which she kept her clothes and ornaments. Till the very end, after taking her bath she worshipped the Lakshmi behind closed doors. Roshan Uncle knew it and so did Rajju Mian. But since she had been doing it from Mirza's times nobody had dared to question her about it. One more job had been added to Junior Aunt's list of chores. Immediately after Bi Darogan finished her bath, Junior Aunt had to carry the fire to her room in a receptacle specifically meant for this purpose.

After finishing her worship Bi Darogan would come out of her room and settle down on the plinth. She would prepare *paans* at short intervals, squirting out *paan* juice on the ground round her. She spend the day in raising squabbles.

"*Bahu*, when did you last sweep the courtyard?" she would ask. Or she would say, "Dust is blowing all over the place. *Bahu*, when you can spare time from sleep or gossip pave the floor and make it fit for people to sit on. What will people say when

they see this filthy place? Even a dog sweeps the place with its tail before sitting down."

If Junior Aunt tried to controvert Bi Darogan, saying that she had swept the courtyard only a short while ago or that she had plastered the entire house only yesterday Bi Darogan would flare up. "So you think I'm blind?" she would fling at her "Why mince words? Just say that I've become senile, that my eyes have lost their sight, that I've become soft in the head due to age. I am telling you, don't be so proud of your youth. Youth doesn't last for ever. It is like the moon-bright for a few days and then total darkness."

If Junior Aunt came up with the plea that she had no respite from work Bi Darogan would retort: "You would have done well to bring a maidservant from your father's house in dowry. Then you could laze around and take it easy like a queen. A housewife cannot shirk work. And for that matter you are not the daughter of a filthy rich father that you had scores of maidservants at your back and call back home. Don't I know? What are you trying to hide from me? You starved in your father's house for want of food and you have put on layers of fat on your skinny body. And how much work is there for you to do, if you ask me? Malti used to keep this house shining like a mirror."

One day when it became too much for her she said, "Amma, I fall at your feet. Don't drag my parent into it. Whatever their present condition, they still live an honourable life. They don't go out with a begging bowl."

At this Bi Darogan created such havoc that Rajju Mian had to intervene. That night nobody ate.

Roshan Uncle was unaware of these goings-on in the house. In the beginning, Junior Aunt would allude to it in passing when alone with her husband. But one day when Roshan Uncle showed resentment and rebuked her for it, she resolved never to talk to him about these things. Roshan Uncle was not prepared to hear anything against his mother "Leave me out of it," he would say. "It's upto you how you deal with these matters."

But that day he could not control himself and just let himself go. He had come late from his evening walk. Perhaps it was going on to be ten and they had gone to sleep. Except for a small portion in which there was light the rest of the house lay

in darkness. It was only after he had been tugging and clanging the door chain for considerable time that Junior Aunt at last opened the door. But as on other evenings, she neither waited for him to come in nor accompanied him to his room to help him take off his shoes. Instead she went straight to the kitchen and returned just to tell him that the food had been laid.

His wife's behaviour was not lost upon Roshan Uncle but he ignored it. He washed and sat down to eat.

Before starting to eat he gave her a quizzical look. Like other days, Junior Aunt was sitting on a low settee by the side of the *chulha*, her right cheek resting on her drawn up knee, her face turned in the other direction.

Uncle Roshan watched her for a moment and a frown appeared on his face. "The food has gone cold. It tastes like clay," he said. "If I'm late is it too much of a trouble to heat it up again?"

Junior Aunt made no reply. She threw a casual glance at Uncle Roshan and then started staring at the *chulha*.

"Why don't you answer me?" he cried. "Don't you have a tongue to speak?"

It was evident that he was trying to pour his wrath gained elsewhere on her innocent head. But when Aunt maintained a stubborn silence he flared up. "I slave day and night to feed idle mouths," he said. "But no one even takes the trouble of giving me a decent meal." Picking up the bowl of *dal* he flung it at Aunt's face. "I'm off, *sal!*" he cried, gritting his teeth. "Now stuff yourself with all this food."

Her face was splattered with *dal* and the sharp edge of the bowl had cut into her forehead. But she neither spoke nor cried. She just kept sitting there with lowered head.

The next day she attended to her work as on other days. Rajju Mian got his morning cup of tea while it was still dark. As usual she pressed her husband's legs and got the water for Bi's bath ready in time. And then to the kitchen to prepare the breakfast.

Roshan Uncle was in the bathroom, waiting for the hot water to be brought in for his bath. "What's happened to your face?" he said in a bitter-sweet voice as Junior Aunt came in with a bucket of water.

Aunt looked at him wordlessly and lowered her head. Her

face was glowing in the bright morning sunlight. On her right cheek she had three small black marks and a small boil. There were two tiny bluish moles near her lip.

"Did the *dal* do it?" Uncle asked in a subdued voice.

"No," Aunt replied and turned to go but he blocked her way and repeated his question in a still softer voice. Realising that she won't be able to escape his questioning, she at last came out with her answer, "It's nothing," she said. "Just a small punishment and nothing more."

"Punishment for what?"

"For being impudent."

"Who punished you?"

"Who else could do it?" Aunt gave a bitter laugh. "Amma wanted to thrust a burning stick into my mouth and when she failed to do so she singed my face."

Uncle stood stock still for a while, watching Aunt. "Why did she do it?" he asked.

"You know why. Why do you ask? The woman who brings water for her has been absenting herself for many days. At times there is not a drop of water in the house. We would just keep waiting for her to come. To forestall this shortage Amma fills one or two pots from the public tap at night and keeps them handy for any contingency. She had never asked for my help but last night she asked me to accompany her to the tap. I expressed my doubt whether I would be able to carry a big pot when I could not even manage with a bucket. At this she got annoyed with me and said that I was malingering."

Junior Aunt looked out apprehensively and then continued: "I wouldn't have minded her fulminations but she exceeded all limits. She said she was not my slave that she should fetch water for me at night while I had fun with you in bed. "Do you think I'm a fool?" she said. She talked a lot more of such obscenities which I cannot repeat to you. I only said that it did not become a mother to talk in such vulgar terms about her own son and daughter-in-law. At this she got so incensed that she started abusing my father, mother, in fact my entire family. Not satisfied, she pulled out a faggot from the *chulha* and ran after me." She pulled her *pallav* from over her shoulder and put it across her eyes to hide her tears. She walked out of the bathroom, sobbing.

That evening Bi Darogan had gone to a neighbour's house

and Uncle Roshan had not returned from his office. As usual, Junior Aunt took a cup of tea for Rajju Mian in his room. He was lying in his cot. His dhoti had slipped, partly exposing one thigh.

Junior Aunt stopped at the door. "Mamujan, your tea," she said without stepping into the room.

Rajju Mian was wide awake and aware of Aunt's presence. But he made no effort to cover up his thigh. He just lay there looking unconcerned. "Bring it here," he said in a staid voice.

Junior Aunt lingered in the door, hoping that Rajju Mian may yet come to the door to take the cup from her. But when he made no move to get up and kept staring at her, she gingerly advanced towards him, quickly handed him the cup and turned to go. "Wait, *Bahu*," Rajju Mian said.

Junior Aunt suddenly stopped as if in her attempt to run away the end of her sari had got entangled in a nail. She always felt apprehensive in Rajju Mian's presence and for that reason she always tried to stay away from him. As she stood there, her heart started pounding. She waited with her back towards him.

"Has your mother-in-law returned?"

"No."

"I don't think she has eaten today. Or has she?" He asked in a tone as if he was ignorant of everything and was now trying to know what had actually transpired. Junior Aunt, however, suspected that he was trying to rake up an old issue. She hesitated for a moment and then said, "I asked her several times but she refused to eat."

Rajju Mian sat up in his cot and stared at Junior Aunt without uttering a word. Then he jumped out of his bed and stood by her side.

Suddenly a child in a neighbour's house started crying. In the same house a cow returning from the pasture lowered. Somewhere the long-necked white ducks cackled. The usual evening noises pervaded the air but Junior Aunt felt as if she was a derelict, cast into a lonely jungle where Rajju Mian's eyes were chasing her as they had the other day.

Unable to raise her eyes and look at him, as she turned to go she felt a hand advancing towards her and holding her arm under her armpit. Petrified, she felt as if her breathing was

going to stop. Her *pallav* slipped from her bosom and fell on her other arm. With the swiftness of lightning she brushed away his hand from her arm and nimbly slipped out of the room like foamy soap slipping out of one's fingers.

At night when Rajju Mian came into the kitchen and sat down to his meal alongside Bi Darogan, Junior Aunt wondered for how long she would be able to carry on in this house. It was not a house but a mystery where fear spread its tentacles from every corner. But how could she tell anybody what was happening with her. Would anybody believe her?

She cautiously looked through her *pallav*. Stuffing his mouth with big handfuls of rice, Rajju Mian was loudly talking with Bi Darogan. His gaunt body and hollow cheeks bore testimony to his declining age. He had small, innocent and kindly eyes and his forehead was still unfurrowed.

"Hai, Allah! what is going on here?" she asked herself. Had she committed some grave sin for which she was now being punished at the very beginning of her new life?

"See what the times have come to." Rajju Mian swallowed his food and then picked up his glass of water. "I know in advance what's going to happen just by watching the trend of things. The very first time I set my eyes on her I knew she was a spirited girl, full of mettle. She walked with downcast eyes but she was hard-boiled. I had warned you not to let her step into our house."

Junior Aunt perked up her ears. Rajju Mian was talking about the murder in his *mohalla* the other day. The investigation conducted in the morning had taken a startling turn. A retired police inspector had been arrested along with the dead man's wife. It had created quite a sensation.

"Little did I suspect that this woman was so wicked," Bi Darogan said in an animated voice. "Being good myself, I expect others are also good like me. Who could think that she was such a daredevil? What she did, not even a man could dare. And she did it in cold blood, without batting an eyelid!"

Without paying heed to Bi Darogan's self-righteous praise of herself Rajju Mian was at pains to point out that even after being arrested the woman had kept a straight face, insisting that she knew nothing about it.

"You know the clever move she made to cover up her tracks!"

Rajju Mian said. "Three days before the ghastly occurrence she cleaned up and plastered the Inspector's house and started living elsewhere. The poor man was killed and dismembered in the Inspector's house and could one believe that he was not aware of what had happened under his own roof? So, the Inspector was hauled up right and proper. The police was suspecting that the murder had been master-minded by a person who knew the intricacies of the law and was aware of the gravity of the crime. Such a complicated crime could not be the handiwork of a lone woman."

Junior Aunt's mouth fell open in surprise and fear. Last month during the course of investigations the police had also visited Rajju Mian's house. He had told them point blank that he had no knowledge of this incident and the police had gone away without harassing him any further. But Junior Aunt's mind was filled with fear. It was a case of murder. The police could suspect anybody and drag him into its net.

"Listen," Bi said, "let us concede for a moment that the woman had some grudge against her husband and had done away with him out of vengeance. People said that the woman had herself once come out with the fact that her husband had strangled her daughter to death. But how could the Inspector be interested in that woman? She was neither young nor beautiful."

"Of course, he could be interested," Rajju Mian said. "There is no greater temptation than money. She knew that her daughter had been done away with by her husband. Obviously, he was her second husband and one can infer from that that girl was his step-daughter. The man often came home drunk and pestered her for money, holding out the threat that she would meet the same fate as her daughter if she did not shell out money. Unable to bear it any more, she at last sought the Police inspector's help, out of sheer desperation. The Inspector who was her tenant must have suggested a way out of her trouble and she must have given him money in return for his advice. A man can be upto anything."

Yes, a man can be upto anything Junior Aunt said to herself and shuddered. Even relatives who professed to be benefactors could deceive in the end. If this incident had not actually happened it would have sounded like a fairy tale.

Could a man strangle his step daughter to death? And that just out of spite could a wife have her husband killed at the hands of a tenant and get his body dismembered and thrown into a well? And . . .

Rajju Mian finished his meal and got up, Bi Darogan following him soon after, leaving Junior Aunt surrounded with soiled utensils. It took her a long time to finish her chores. She was leaving the kitchen when she suddenly recalled what had happened with her in the evening. The sensation of Rajju Mian holding her under the arm revived. But did Rajju Mian really do it or she was only imagining things just as on visiting a new and unfamiliar place one sometimes feels that one had been there before?

"amma, some customers have come to buy bangles," Junior Aunt casually threw the news at her mother-in-law.

Bi Darogan was resting on her cot. Although the information had clearly registered on her mind she made no sign of getting up. She just lay there facing the wall. On being told again, she turned on her side and started at Junior Aunt as if she had given her some unwelcome news. At last she got up and said in a listless, reluctant voice: "*Rahu*, won't you let me have some respite even at my age? My life has been nothing but a harrowing tale of suffering."

On previous occasions Junior Aunt had expressed her inability to slip bangles on customer's wrists, fearing that she may break them in the process.

"So you refuse to learn for fear of breaking the bangles?" Bi Darogan would say testily. "A nice excuse that, I must say. But where there's a will there's a way. Look at Roshan Uncle. He is a man and yet he can handle this job so splendidly."

Bi Darogan's jibes would hurt and out of sheer pique, Junior Aunt would attempt to slip bangles onto customers' wrists. But without much success. Either the bangles broke or she drew blood from the customer's wrist, putting Bi Darogan to loss. Ultimately she had given up trying even though she had to bear the old woman's taunts.

Bi Darogan came out of the room on reluctant feet to meet her customers who were patiently waiting for her. For some time past she had stopped entertaining customers at home. Even otherwise business had greatly declined.

Rajju Mian had retired from service a long time back in

order to help Bi Darogan who could not manage the bangle business single-handed. While in service once every two months he made a trip to Raipur to replenish stocks, but had had ultimately to give up his job because of the difficulty of getting leave so frequently. But within the very first few months of relenquishing his job he had learnt what it meant to be unemployed. By then it was too late to retrieve his job.

He had tried to get Roshan a job as soon as he had completed his education. Rajju Mian's erstwhile job had stood him in good stead in getting Roshan launched in life. He had served in a princely state and had had access to all the high-ups, not to mention his own popularity with the small fry. Taking a cue from a friend, one day Rajju Mian took out his old *achkan*, slipped on his narrow pajamas and tying his orange-coloured turban presented himself before the English Diwan of the state. Folding his hands before the Saheb he said, "*Hazoor*, this slave of yours served the state to the best of his ability but due to indifferent health he had to voluntarily relenquish his job with honour intact. He has a young son, adequately educated. Through *Hazoor's* benevolence he is looking for an opportunity to tread on the right path. Additionally, this will mean that his aged parents will be able to pass their remaining lives in peace and comfort."

They say that the Englishmen were kind-hearted and duly rewarded honesty and hard work. Within a few days Roshan Uncle got a clerk's job in the Tehsildar's court. After his marriage he had worked his way up to a position where dhoti or pajamas were frowned upon and only pant and coat were considered to be the proper dress. The feet had to be shod in a pair of pointed shoes and a pocket watch with a chain had to dangle from the breast pocket.

Bi Darogan gradually lost interest in her business and Rajju Mian devoted his time to looking after his land, in the village. Now they kept only a small stock of fancy and high class bangles in the house. And since Bi Darogan had stopped attending to her shop in the bazaar only purdah ladies of rich families visited her house to buy bangles.

There was a flurry of activity till ten, the time at which Roshan Uncle left for his office. After that the work fell into a jog-trot routine. Bi did not go out anywhere till evening while

Rajju Mian spent most of his time in his room. If at all, he went and sat in the backyard or in the verandah, eavesdropping on the women's group to the accompaniment of coughing. The rest of the time he would lie in his cot, smoking *biri* after *biri* and filling the room with smoke.

In fact Junior Aunt was scared of the people of the house and their ways. That evening's encounter with Rajju Mian had not only upset her but had also filled her mind with a sense of guilt. She would suddenly give a start while sitting alone and then look around with suspicious eyes as if someone was stalking her. Or her mind would suddenly start wandering and she would lose interest in her work. She would feel that resting his head on the window sill, someone was stealthily watching her. While bathing she would suddenly withdraw into herself and sit down rolled up like a ball as if someone had broken into the bathroom and she didn't know how to cover her shame.

Something similar happened that afternoon. After finishing her chores she went in for a bath. She had a big heap of clothes to wash and it looked as if she would never be able to finish with them. As on other afternoons, the back yard was deserted and Bi Darogan and Rajju Mian were resting in their respective rooms.

Junior Aunt would wash two or three clothes at a time, squeeze the water out of them and then come out to hang them on the clothes line.

The sun was blazing over the courtyard. Just wearing a petticoat which she had tied across her shoulders she had come out to hang the last of the clothes when she heard footsteps in the verandah. As she turned to look she was almost stunned at what she saw. Rajju Mian was standing there, unblinkingly staring at her. On a sudden impulse she was going to squat down on the floor but without knowing what she was doing, she threw away the clothes she had in her hands and ran back into the bathroom. She started panting as if she had escaped death.

One day when Roshan was in a good mood she said to him, "Why don't you ask Uncle to go out sometime? He should visit people once in a while. But he keeps hibernating in the house all the time."

"Why, has something happened?"

"Where?" Junior Aunt asked, a little non-plussed. Then she quickly collected herself. "No, nothing has happened," she said. "But it does not look nice for men to stay indoors day and night. Women can't be careful about their appearance all the time. Sometimes they are properly dressed and sometimes not. They have to do so many odd jobs in the house, you know. While bathing, you know what I mean...."

"You mean he should do some foot-slogging just for the fun of it," Roshan said cutting her short. "You mean even when he has nowhere to go. Really, sometimes you talk so funnily."

"Who says he should keep knocking all over the town?" Junior Aunt countered, sensing her husband's mood. "I never said that. But what's wrong in spending sometime with neighbours? What else are neighbours for?"

Roshan Uncle looked hard at her and she flinched under his gaze. She regretted having broached the subject at all. It had only created bad feeling. She should have come straight to the point instead of mincing words. In fact, for the past many days she had been preparing the ground and had been turning over in her mind how she would make her point. But when it came to telling him she just fumbled and made a hash of the whole thing with the result that Roshan Uncle complained that she was trying to drive a wedge between him and his parents, that she did not look after them properly. Did she want him to drive them out in a rage? What would the people say? Had his parents brought him up so lovingly so that he may show them the door when it suited him? Had they got him a wife just for that?

Junior Aunt bit her tongue. She wanted to tell him why Rajju Mian had made him marry her. She thought she would lay bare the facts even if she had to rue the consequences later on. But then she thought better of it. Now that she had to live here she must also learn to put up with such ignominy or she may be despised and thrown out with a flick of the finger. She made a firm resolve to keep her lips sealed.

After her marriage it was her mother's first visit to her. It being a Sunday, free from the worry of getting ready for the office, Roshan Uncle was still sleeping in his room. After finishing her breakfast, Bi was sitting in the verandah, leisurely chewing

a *paan*. Because of the overhanging tree the sun had not yet come into the courtyard.

Junior Aunt was sitting by the side of the *chulha* when Bi's voice suddenly reached her, "*Bahu*, see who has come—your mother."

There could be no happier event than a visitor from the bride's family. Junior Aunt's heart missed a beat, so happy she was. She would have rushed out and hugged her mother but she was conscious of her constraints which forced her to be as if her mouth was gagged, her body was tied down with ropes and only her eyes were open. If she made an attempt to run she would stagger and fall like a bird whose wings are tied; it can only flutter its wings but can not fly. After her marriage it had been hammered into her head, in season and out of season, that a girl was not expected to directly meet people from her home until they had paid their respects to her in-law's and other relatives. It was only then that she should present herself before the visitor, and even then, not before being called to do so.

Although they were living in the same town she had not met any member of her family for the last four to five months. Once or twice she had expressed a desire to visit her parents but her request had only been greeted with a cold stare. More, she had been taunted that she was trying to take undue advantage of the proximity of the two houses. What, if her parents had been living in a different town? Could she have in that case, made such a brazen demand? A girl's parents stop existing for her on the very day she gets into the marriage palanquin to go to her in-law's house.

Sitting still on her *pirhi* in the kitchen Junior Aunt patiently waited for the second call. Then she became restless and stood up from her seat. A wall in front had blocked her view. There was a small window in the wall through which she could see a small patch of the outside world consisting of a small line of mango trees and a corner of a plinth. She could not see any part of the verandah from where she stood.

At last she heard Bi's voice, "*Arre, Bahu*, aren't you listening? Your Amma is here." Then she added in a false note of commiseration, "Poor woman, she keeps busy the whole day with one thing and another. She has not a moment's rest from work."

Carefully adjusting the *pallav* over her head, Junior Aunt came out and looked hungrily at her mother. She had been married only six months and she felt that even in that short period of absence from home her Amma's hair had turned grey and her face had become more lined than before. How would Abba be faring in her absence?

Junior Aunt paid her respects and waited. Mother and daughter looked at each other wordlessly, the inner layers of their minds slowly unfolding. But there was no way of exploring the layers independently. The mother-in-law stood between the two, while their eyes silently talked with each other till it appeared that Junior Aunt had said all that was to be said and her presence was not required any more.

"Daughter!" Amma said in a burred voice, her eyes full of tears. "You couldn't even take some time off to see your mother?"

Junior Aunt suppressed her feelings with great effort. "The rice was about to boil," she said. "I had to watch it. I'm sorry I'm late."

With these words she returned to the kitchen. Amma lingered for sometime but of what transpired between her and Bi Darogan she had no knowledge. Before leaving, Amma came into the kitchen but even then she could not have a heart to heart talk with Junior Aunt. She stood there blinking at her with tearful eyes. "All right, *beti*," she said.

Junior Aunt had many questions to ask; they came flooding her mind. How was Abba? Did his asthma still torment him? Did Bhaiyya still keep late nights? Didn't she reprove him for it? Who feeds the rabbits? Have the guinea pigs littered again? And . . .

Just then they heard Bi's voice who was heading for them from the verandah. Wiping her eyes, Amma made a hurried exit through the front door.

"The silent afternoon lazily sprawling before them could be a lie but not what had transpired that day," Bhabi Zahira had remarked. But how one could be so cocksure was beyond Junior Aunt's comprehension. Whenever somebody made such categorical assertions it only made her gape in wonder. In the first place, she doubted the truth of such statements but even if she believed them, she was incredulous that such a thing could be

associated with that particular name whose bonafides she knew to the very core.

The silent and tongueless afternoon sun lay sprawled over the roads of the town. The breeze blew fitfully and the trees stood lifelessly over their own shadows. Nothing seemed to stir. From some unknown distance came the trilling of crickets, punctuated with the dull thud of clothes being beaten on the tank's washing slab. At irregular intervals one heard the stray cawing of a crow and then the eye meandered over the same lifeless expanse of sunlit afternoon stretching into infinity. . . .

Standing at the door Junior Aunt was watching the afternoon scene when she suddenly recalled what Bhabi had said to her last night.

They had all gone to *Milad* and had returned quite late at night. Junior Aunt was not keen on going but she was feeling bored, having remained confined within the four-walls for so long. Bi's prompting, though half-hearted had at last clinched the issue. Besides, she was lured by the possibility of meeting her mother there.

She was feeling shy. She could not even walk properly. At every step she feared that her feet would sink into the earth, making her an object of ridicule to the passers-by. To wear *mehzar* even after eight months of marriage and to walk into the audience with tinkling anklets would seem so odd. She had protested to Bi that she would look funny attired in this fashion but Bi Darogan had only frowned. "Aren't you still a bride?" she had asked in a sharp voice. "You must know that a bride's palms must smell of *mehndi* (myrtle) for at least a year and a half after marriage."

The mother-in-law walking in front and the obedient *Bahu* following her meekly, the *mehzir's* veil drawn down her face to an arm's length and her feet a tinkle with bells Junior Aunt going to *Milad* was quite a sight. She gingerly sat down among the audience but refused to raise her head for fear of being laughed at. As for Bi, the moment she secured a place in the gathering she lost no time in throwing *salaam* right and left and stopped this 'give-and-take' only when the *milad* ceremony commenced. When all had settled down Junior Aunt raised her head, searching for her mother and spotted Zahira Bhabi making her way towards her through the crowd. "Dulhan!" she

held Junior Aunt's arm. Her face fresh and bright like a *jasan* flower, she beamed at Junior Aunt. Zahira Bhabhi had her own way of conducting herself. When she met someone she talked with gay abandon, making no distinction between young and old. She was wearing a diaphanous pink sari, a little wind-blown, a blouse of the same colour, the sari's *pallav* resting on her arm, a thick *afshan* mark in the parting of her hair and slightly *paan* stained teeth, her big eyelashes drooping over her eyes every moment. Junior Aunt felt that not only had her complexion improved since she had last seen her but she had also put on more flesh, showing her figure to greater advantage.

"*Bhabhi*, salaam!" Junior Aunt smiled and shifting closer sat down facing her.

Bhabhi blessed Junior Aunt and then gave her a mischievous smile. "Let's move to that corner," she said. She implied that she didn't like sitting there surrounded by old women but Junior Aunt expressed her helplessness with a gesture of her hand and then pointed towards her mother-in-law. Bhabhi Zahira slid still closer to Junior Aunt and giving Bi a winsome smile said, "Auntie, you don't mind if we go and sit at the back?"

Bi Darogan had often reminded Junior Aunt that it was incumbent upon young women to deport themselves with dignity in such assemblies. "They should show older women proper respect, talk less and listen more. These are the signs of good upbringing. And never laugh loudly. He! He! He!"

Junior Aunt feared that Bi Darogan would come out with an outright refusal. She may even express annoyance. But without waiting for Bi Darogan's reply Bhabhi Zahira dragged Junior Aunt to a secluded corner.

"How are you getting along?" she asked Junior Aunt after they had easily settled down. "Since you have started living with your 'youngman' we see very little of you."

Junior Aunt gave an evasive smile. "But you also rarely visit us," she said.

"*Hai*, Allah!" Bhabhi coyly danced her eyes. "You mean only you have a husband and none else? I agree you are newly married. But you know the saying: old things stand better wear and tear."

Junior Aunt could never match Bhabhi's wit. She would only reply to her with a smile and that is what she did this time too.

Bhabi talked of many things but everytime it veered round to her husband's younger brother who had come to stay with them during the vacation—what he looked like, what kind of clothes he wore, what he studied. In short, he could not move an inch without her. He ate if she gave him something to eat. Otherwise, he just sat there gaping at her face.

"I ask how long can things go on in this manner?" Bhabi went on blithely. 'I can't look after you all your life', I tell him. 'Will you also become a burden on your wife?' I ask him. "Bhabi stopped for an instant and taking her mouth to Junior Aunt's ear said in a conspiratorial tone, 'Bhabi, you are so beautiful!' he said. 'If I had seen you earlier, I would have blocked your marriage with Bhaiyya. You see, what a mischievous lad he is! I laughed and said. 'I hope you've not lost your heart to me. Mian, if you have some designs, on me let me know in time!' "

Junior Aunt looked apprehensively around. Their whisperings had drawn the attention of many towards them. Junior Aunt was particularly afraid of Bi Darogan that she would catch them in this incriminating tete-a-tete. She changed her stance many times, yawned, and in order to stop Zahira Bhabi from prattling, she tried to change the subject of her 'discourse'. She would disinterestedly start looking elsewhere, suddenly ask about someone in the audience, who the one wearing the blue sari was, or who that person was reading the *milad* so effectively, or when Bhabi would visit their house. But undeterred, Bhabi would revert to her favourite topic, centered round the earth shaking goings-on between her and her young brother-in-law. Even when she caught Junior Aunt's hint she pretended as if she had understood nothing.

At last they got up *en masse* to say their 'salaam'.

After the 'salaam' Junior Aunt wanted to get back to her old place but a lot of women crowded her way and Bhabi would not let her move off. She prodded her in her side and gestured with her eyes to look ahead of her.

"Who's she," Junior Aunt asked. It was a wheat-complexioned, sedate-looking woman of twenty-five or so, thin and sickly, with jaundiced eyes.

"I'll tell you," Bhabi Zahira said, dancing her eyes and looking around. "First fix her clearly in your mind."

"I think I've seen her somewhere."

"You might have. How does she look to you? Doesn't she look like a virgin?"

Junior Aunt greeted her question with a laugh and Bhabi joined her. "I'm not joking, really," she said with gusto. "But before I say anything more you must tell me whether she looks a virgin or not."

And then Bhabi told her something which left Junior Aunt aghast? She put her hands on her ears.

They started distributing *sheerni* and soon the assembly started breaking up. As the congregation of women thinned Bhabhi caught Junior Aunt's hand. "Come, I'll introduce you to that girl," she said.

Giving Junior Aunt no time to think, she dragged her towards the girl. "Rashida, so you've also come?"

Rashida, who was about to move away, stopped and turned to look. But Zahira Bhabi's presence seemed to have created no impression on her for she turned an expression—less face towards her, akin to a dead leaf lying in the shadows. Standing she looked taller and thinner than what she had looked like sitting.

"Were you sitting here?" Zahira Bhabi asked another meaningless question. Her first question was in fact no question—it was only an overture for talk. It surprised Junior Aunt that in spite of Zahira Bhabi's warmth of feeling Rashida's face had remained blank; she looked vacantly at Bhabi as if she was not looking at a woman but at a lifeless pillar of stone.

"Meet her..." Zahira turned to Aunt laughing. "Roshan's wife—Bi's daughter-in-law."

Rashida cast a fleeting glance at Junior Aunt, gave her an imperceptible nod and then fixed her eyes on Zahira Bhabi. "When was she married? Must be recently."

"Yes, it's less than a year," Bhabi replied. Junior Aunt noticed that Rashida's face suddenly fell. She looked wistfully at Junior Aunt's *mehzar* and then her gaze slid over her black necklace and over the red line in the parting of her hair. She slowly adjusted her *pallav* over her head and fixed her eyes on the gas lamp hanging from a pole at some distance from her.

The women had in the meanwhile started moving out, their children straggling behind them.

Someone in the crowd called out Rashida's name.

"I must go," Rashida said without looking at Junior Aunt and was soon lost in the crowd. She had not even invited Bhabi to pay her a visit. Bhabi kept looking in the direction in which she had gone. Then she curled her lips. "A strange woman indeed!" she said. "You'll be surprised last time when she met me she talked on and on but today she carried on as if she had not even recognised me. Sometimes she behaves so queerly."

On her way back home Junior Aunt kept thinking of Rashida. She had learnt from Bhabi that Rashida's father was dead and she was now living with her uncle who himself being indigent had not been able to arrange her marriage. And in the meanwhile she had been getting on in years. If any one came with an offer her uncle unceremoniously turned away the man, hurling abuses at him. He had been trotting out the excuse that there was a dearth of suitable boys in his community who could be worthy of his niece's hand, whereas the reality was quite different—so different that one would have liked to pull out his tongue rather than allowing him to get away with his lie. He sported a beard and looked venerable. He said *namaz* five times a day. A pious man to all appearances, but in his heart... "May God have mercy on him. Worms will crawl in his body."

Bhabi's expression had hardened and she had contemptuously spat on the ground. "I know that old man very well," she had continued. "Women used to visit the house to see Rashida's aunt while she was living. But with her passing away they also stopped coming. Do you know what that old man used to do? He used to ogle these women surreptitiously. He would climb up to the roof, dislodge a tile and peep at these purdah-women through the hole. Once a woman came to meet his wife. She happened to be away from home but the old man called the woman in and shut the door of the room. Well, granted, some people have dirty ideas but even they should draw the line somewhere. They should not forget that these women are like their own daughters. Otherwise what is the difference between a man and an animal?"

Junior Aunt had looked at Zahira Bhabi in surprise.

"Don't you believe me?" Zahira Bhabi asked. "In the beginning, I also refused to believe it. But one day Rashida herself told me the whole story. 'I'm no doubt alive but I am as good as dead,' she said. 'How long are you going to live this

life of ignominy?" I asked her. 'The wells and rivers have not gone dry. Poison can still be had anywhere for the asking.'

"Bahu, whom are you watching, standing at the door?" a voice came from inside. Both the flaps of the back door were ajar. The ground in front was bathed in sunlight. The trees stood silent and still, fallow leaves lying under their shadows as before.

Closing the door as Junior Aunt turned to go in, she saw Bi Darogan standing there, muttering to herself. Junior Aunt quickly proceeded towards the kitchen. Rashida's picture was still haunting her mind. She did not care to find out what her mother-in-law was saying. She was surprised that though she had been living here for a long time and was quite familiar with her mother-in-law's voice, having heard it hundreds of times, yet, while retracing her steps, she felt as if it was not her mother-in-law but Rajju Mian who had called her.

SUDDENLY Junior Aunt sat up in bed, tense with fear, and looked cowering round the room. Sweat had broken out on her body and her heart was pounding. She was sitting with her legs pulled up at an angle forty five degrees and her hand resting on one leg. An unshaded bedlamp, standing in the alcove was shedding a pale light in the room.

“What a horrible dream!” she mumbled, a tremor running through her body. As she closed her eyes, disjointed parts of the dream flitted across her mind in a meaningless jumble. The dream was so incoherent that it seemed to lack any meaning. Convinced that it was only a fabrication of her morbid imagination she thought of getting out of bed and

going out of the room. But her nerve failed her.

She looked furtively at her husband. He was still sleeping. She again lay down in bed to snatch some more sleep. She hoped it would make her forget the dream.

It had been happening thus for the past many nights. It always took her a long time to fall asleep and when sleep came at last it was disturbed by dreams. It was generally the same dream with minor variations. She dreamed that she was on the verge of death but just before going over to the Great Beyond she would have a precarious feeling that it was not reality but only a dream and she would then come awake.

On another night she dreamed that she was wandering alone and forlorn in a lonely forest. She was descending into a flower laden valley, dotted with tall saal trees. But as she looked up she saw a big mottled serpent rapidly slithering towards her. She turned back and although she ran with all her might for dear life the distance between her and the serpent did not diminish till the serpent overtook her and coiled itself around her body. And then she woke up.

Again, she dreamt that she had gone to a country fair with her husband. He got separated from her in the crowd and she was left behind. Suddenly she turned round and found that her husband was not with her. Instead it was Rajju Mian walking by her side. Then Rashida also materialised from somewhere and as she cast a glance at her father-in-law his face changed into that of her, Rashida's, uncle. Oh, Allah! how was she going to face this predicament? She was just going to fall when someone slipped his hand under her arm and clasped her from behind...

A plethora of such dreams whose implications she failed to understand. One day, in utter despair, she told about them to her husband. He remarked: "It's because all day long your mind is pre-occupied with idle thoughts. But are you really scared of death?"

Junior Aunt had no answer to it. As a matter of fact, of course, no one wants to die. But she thought it would sound silly to make such a confession before her husband after having once blandly told him that she had no great love for life. She had said that she would deem herself lucky if she pre-deceased her husband.

What time was it, she wondered. She slowly got out of her bed and standing by its side looked at her husband. It would soon be morning.

A long line of bullock carts had already appeared on the road and she could hear the creaking of their wheels as they moved along the road. She could hear loud snores emanating from Rajju Mian's room. Junior Aunt had noted that as the night advanced he slid into a deeper slumber and snored heavily which sometimes scared her.

Before retiring for sleep Junior Aunt was frequently haunted by nameless fears. Her husband still being away she would be alone in her room and the stillness of the *mohalla* would make her nerves shiver. As evening approached, people closed their doors and the *mohalla* wore a deserted look. She could not hear a single sound. The silence was occasionally shattered by the shrill cries of water birds flying over the Moti Talab or the howling of jackals in the fields across the road. Then the dogs of the *mohalla* would join them, the night resounding with their individual and collective barking.

She had often told her husband through hints that he should return home early. In the evening, the *mohalla* lay in silence and since Bi and Rajju Mian stayed up in their rooms she felt lonely in the big house which gave her the creeps. Last night while lying in bed she had kept thinking of Zahira Bhabi and Rashida. She had been with Rashida hardly for five minutes but even in this short time every line of her face had got etched in her mind and she could recall her vividly. From Rashida her mind jumped to Rajju Mian and she realised that she was not alone in the house. As she lay there she felt that there was someone clinging to the door and peering at her through the darkness.

Her heart pounding hard, she kept her eyes glued to the door as if by doing so she was keeping some impending calamity at bay. She feared that the moment she took her eyes off the door the calamity would stalk into the room with the force of a dam burst. "Who's there?" she asked in a bold voice which had a touch of bravado.

For an instant it appeared to her that the silhouette outlined in the door had vanished from the door. Swallowing her fear, Junior Aunt repeated her question. But no answer

came. She only heard a faint sound in the verandah and held her breath. She was going to shout with all her might when she heard Roshan's footsteps and then a knock on the door.

As was his habit, Roshan Uncle washed his hands and face and waited for a few minutes before sitting down to eat. But Jounior Aunt did not tell him about her trepidations. She was accustomed to suffering in silence. After tossing in bed for sometime she fell asleep.

What if she had told him? What would have been the consequences? She lay there looking into space while her mind kept hovering round Rajju Mian. This question had come up last time too and she now regretted having agreed to Rajju Mian's living with them under the same roof. Although she had not given them an inkling of her mind then or later, from the very next day she had understood from her in-laws sudden hostility towards her what was in store for her. "They are jealous of us—that's why", Bi had flung it at her face. "But why should they feel jealous of us? My husband and I have sweated day and night for years to make a living. What's wrong if we now laze it out at the fag end of our lives, now that our son is here to look after our comforts? Do we thereby tread on anybody's corns?"

Her taunts angered Junior Aunt. Bi had a knack of saying one thing and meaning something else. She gloated in the savagery of double meanings.

A bird flew over their roof, screaming. On a nearby tree the bats flapped their wings in unison and their ominous sound floated through the darkness. The jackals seemed to have receded into the distance but a solitary dog still kept barking on the road.

There seemed to be no apparent reason for it, but that night Junior Aunt kept crying a long time.

The next morning she saw something new in the house. Some children were reading loudly in Rajju Mian's room. They were learning the Urdu alphabet by heart. Although Junior Aunt was in a hurry to attend to her morning chores she could not resist her curiosity and sneaked up close to Rajju Mian's room to watch. Four or five children were standing in a semi-circle and Rajju Mian was sitting on the floor facing them. Primers in hand, the boys were reading

from them in a sing-song manner, dutifully swaying their heads.

"Why do they put the sign of *zabar* under the first alphabet *Alif*?" Rajju Mian asked in the manner of a seasoned school-master.

The children gaped at his face, not knowing what to say.

"So you don't know," Rajju Mian laughed indulgently. "Tell me, how do we look when we put on our caps? We look nice, don't we? Likewise, when you add the sign of *zabar* to the alphabet *Alif* it looks nice to the eye. You understand."

Rajju Mian had no cap on his head. The children looked at his capless pate and then touching their own caps looked at one another. Then they broke into smiles as if the whole thing had registered on their minds.

He asked another question.

The children responded to it with tense silence.

"Come on, It's very easy", Rajju Mian prodded them. But when their faces remained blank he explained to them the whole thing with loving care. "This sign is meant to join two letters," he said with an air of finality. "It performs a very sacred function."

"How is it that Uncle has suddenly started teaching?" Junior Aunt asked her husband in the evening. She was fanning him while he was taking his meal.

"Oh, that?" he said. "He just collects some children of the neighbourhood and teaches them."

"What else do regular teachers do? They also do the teaching like him."

"Why, is there anything wrong about it?"

"No, there's nothing wrong about it," Junior Aunt said. "He couldn't have done anything better than this. What struck me was the suddenness of it."

"But you were yourself complaining the other day that he keeps idle the whole day."

"Who was complaining? I?" Junior Aunt stopped fanning and looked at her husband in surprise. "When did I say that he does not do any work." All that I had said was that it did not look nice for him to remain glued to the house all the twenty-four hours of the day. A man should socialise with other men."

"Forget it," Uncle Roshan said testily. "Every day I deal with half a dozen lawyers at the court. But you are more cunning than all of them."

Sensing his mood, Aunt discreetly dropped the subject.

They heard Rajju Mian's angry outcry: "Roshan's mother, how many times must I shout for a cup of tea?" Sitting in his room, he was flinging the question at Bi.

Roshan Uncle stopped eating and cast a questioning look at his wife. Scared, Junior Aunt lowered her head. "I sent him a cup of tea only a short while ago," she said.

Rajju Mian kept muttering that in spite of having slaved all his life he was still regarded as a superfluous person whose very presence they could not tolerate in the house. They openly ignored him. For a cup of tea he had to cry himself hoarse before they fling it at his face.

"*Bahu*, could you get some tea for him?" Bi Darogan repeated her husband's request in a pained voice.

Leaving other chores aside, Junior Aunt quickly prepared a cup of tea and rushed out with it. Rajju Mian was standing in the verandah, muttering. Seeing Junior Aunt coming he stopped muttering and looked away.

Standing with the cup before Bi, Junior Aunt said in self-defence, "Amma, I had sent a cup of tea only a short while ago."

"As if you have squandered away your father's whole wealth on a cup of tea!" Bi Darogan gesticulated wildly, waving her hand in the air. "You must know your place in the house—daughter-in-law as you are. Don't get too big for your shoes."

Junior Aunt stood there abjectly holding the cup of tea but Rajju Mian refused to accept it. "Take it away", he said, "It lacks grace. I can do without it"

Bi's voice rose shrilly, "Roshan," she cried, "Is this what you have taught your wife?"

Roshan was sitting in the kitchen, finishing his meal. He came out in a huff, without washing his hands. Holding Junior Aunt by her hair, he gave her a few blows. "*Sali!*" he cried, "You live on my crumbs and still have the audacity to bandy words with my parents! I'm the one who earns and runs the house. Who are you to poke your nose in my affairs? If you have to live in this house it must be in my terms. Otherwise,

pack up and be gone!"

A hush fell in the room. Bi stopped muttering. Seeing Roshan beating his wife, Rajju Mian slunk away. Uncle was so worked up that he left for his office without taking the *paandan* with him. Only Junior Aunt was left in the room, sobbing bitterly.

In the evening she heard Rajju Mian saying to Bi, "Roshan's mother, better send for Malti. Under this woman's reign we shall die a dog's death."

If luck had favoured her, with her beauty and other qualities, Malti would have married in a rich family and lived there like a queen. Tall, fair complexion, sharp and regular features, well-filled body and a smiling face. Could one ever suspect that she was born in a low caste water-carrier's family and brought up there? Well-mannered and soft-spoken, she carried herself with dignity. In fact she had all the graces and would have easily passed for a member of an affluent and cultured family. But it seemed fate had willed otherwise. She took birth in a dhewar family of Padampur village.

It was summer. Every afternoon the sky became overcast and the clouds turning dark descended over the mango, tamarind and the tall saal trees, bringing down heavy rain.

Rajju Mian had his lands in Padampur and he had gone there to supervise their first tilling. The job was finished in two days, leaving him free to spend the rest of time as he pleased. One morning he was returning from a stroll when he happened to pass by a tumble-down thatched hut, a lock hanging from its door. To his surprise, he heard the shrill cry of a child emanating from the hut. After waiting for an hour he assembled some people from the village and had the lock broken in their presence. It was a three or four year girl looking miserable with crying. Its mother was nowhere to be seen.

It was a common practice with the women in the countryside to go out to work, leaving their children behind. So without expressing any concern, Rajju Mian brought the child to his house and had it properly fed. He was to leave that day but decided to postpone his departure to the next day. Having no child of his own, his dormant paternal instinct was suddenly aroused and he decided to take away the child with him.

When none turned up to claim the child, Rajju Mian went

to the village and sat down in the revenue clerk's room with the foundling who had by now become quite friendly with him. But Rajju Mian's enthusiasm suddenly collapsed when the revenue clerk told him that the girl was Kola dhewar's daughter who the previous night had eloped with an unknown man.

"Where's her father?" Rajju asked after he had got over his shock.

"Bhaiyya, he died a year ago," the revenue clerk informed him. "Had he been alive the girl would not have become an orphan."

Rajju Mian sat silent for a while, fondling the child's head. But one could see from his expression that something was weighing on his mind. After waiting for two days he decided to take the girl with him and was gone. In fact he feared trouble from Bi Darogan who could be so unpredictable. But contrary to his fears Bi was delighted at the sight of the child. "You did well to bring her with you," she said. "She could have fallen into evil hands and that would have blighted her life for good. Let her live with us. If her mother shows up we shall deliver the girl to her."

This was thirteen years ago. That four-year old foundling whom they had named, Malti, had grown into a vivacious girl of seventeen. Since nobody had come to claim her during this long period of fourteen years she had become a part of Rajju's family. Bi Darogan would beam as she beheld the girl. "She looks so beautiful and is so well-behaved," she would tell her husband. "Had there not been those faint pock marks on her face we would have told them that she is our own child."

"Don't be silly," Rajju Mian would laugh. "Can a woman fill her womb with another's child?"

"Who says my womb is barren?" Bi would say putting some vehemence in her voice. "Allah has given me also a child. But I so much want to have a daughter too. Not that matters now. But mind you, don't you again say that I'm barren."

Malti could not attend Roshan Uncle's marriage. Bi's elder sister who lived in a distant village had been ailing for a long time. She was too ill to look after her land and could not even cook her meal. When Bi went to see her she decided to leave Malti behind to look after her.

Since then Malti had been living with the aunt. Rajju was

not happy with this arrangement and would often express his displeasure at it. Although Malti was living far from them Bi Darogan would talk Rajju Mian into thinking that she was living just next door, within hailing distance. Couldn't he understand that she had certain responsibilities towards her sister? she would argue with Rajju Mian. But at last she gave way to his urgings and called the girl over.

When Malti arrived Junior Aunt was in the bathroom washing clothes. Raising the front part of her sari she had tucked it at the waist and put her *anchal* over her shoulder. The soap lather hung over her hair and face. She made quite a picture as she sat there dipping her hands in milk-white lather, her bare legs thrown out.

She squirmed, suddenly finding Malti standing at the door. Taking her hands out of the mound of soap foam she jerked the lather of it and pulled down the sari over her bare legs. She was going to adjust her sari over her bosom when Malti caught her hand. "Bhabi, salaam!" she greeted her.

Junior Aunt mechanically responded to her greeting, her curiosity glancing out of her eyes. She stood up adjusting her sari over her body, still wondering who this visitor could be.

"Don't you know me, Bhabi? I'm Malti." She stood aside to let Aunt pass

"Of course, you can't recognise me," Malti said trying to dispel Aunt's embarrassment. "I could not attend your marriage and its only now that I've found time to visit you"

Junior Aunt cast a quick glance at Malti while covering her head. Yes, she was beautiful, indeed. There was no doubt of that. Healthy and fresh like rain-washed grass, soft-spoken and sunny. She was more beautiful than what the reports about her had said. She thought that if she wore nice clothes and took off those odd looking pieces of rustic jewellery, she could easily pass for the lady of the house, supplanting her.

Holding Malti's hand, Junior Aunt led her in. "Why didn't you attend our marriage?" she asked.

"I just couldn't. Mother was ill. Sometimes it appeared as if she was almost gone. And then I got the news of the marriage rather late. I wished I could put on wings and fly here but I was helpless. I felt so bad at missing the marriage."

"Mother—you mean Bi's sister?" Junior Aunt asked.

"I even tried to come afterwards. But Mother put her foot down. And then the rains came which placed a ready excuse in her hands. The rail bridges could collapse in heavy rain, she said."

"How far is your village from here?"

"It's four days journey by bullock cart."

As Malti said this a village in the remote terrain of Southern Bastar, surrounded by palms and salpi and chind trees which Junior Aunt had seen in her childhood vividly came to her mind.

The villages of Southern Bastar bordering on Andhra Pradesh looked so different from other villages—small, squat mud huts covered with dry palm leaves, tobacco plants swaying in the near distance and cylindrical gourds hanging from the roofs. And there were big-wheeled carts pulled by big bullocks. When the high wind blew the tall palms rising to the sky, swayed helplessly, their large fan-like leaves and coconut-like fruits dropping to the ground.

"Come, first have a wash." Junior Aunt said. She feared that if she sat longer with Malti, her quick eye would divine how unhappy she was in spite of her facade of liveliness.

"Am I getting jealous of Malti?" she asked herself. But why should she? Malti was just a simple girl and an orphan who had grown leaning upon others and winning their hearts with sweet words and winsome manners.

For the first time Junior Aunt's thoughts went to her own body. Since her marriage her husband had not brought her even one yard of cloth as a gift. She was till now managing with the clothes that had been made for her at the time of her wedding. They were not expected to last for long. Her thoughts went to Zahira Bhabi who like so many other women went out spruced up, powdered-face and all. But Junior Aunt could not deck herself like them; she found it so embarrassing. She had tried once, just as a matter of experiment and never touched cosmetics after that. But to have nice clothes was something different. It came to her as a great surprise that till now she had not paid any attention to her appearance or cared to think of the state of her health. What did she look like to Malti, she wondered.

That night Rajju Mian and Bi Darogan stayed awake till

late at night, talking with Malti. She had come after a year and a half and they had such a lot to talk. As they sat there chatting, Junior Aunt several times came to the door to listen. But they were talking in such low voices that she could not catch what they were saying.

With Malti's coming over the house began to run in a more orderly manner; gone was the stampede to get things done and so were Rajju Mian's howls for his cup of tea. Nor did Bi's hands itch to fly at Junior Aunt's throat. True, Malti never came forward to lend a helping hand to Junior Aunt. Her whole time was spent in looking after Rajju Mian and Bi Darogan. She would make *paans* for Bi, sweep Rajju Mian's room, mend his old clothes, wash his bedsheets every eight or ten days and attend to such other jobs. This would keep her busy till she retired for the night.

Even now one heard Rajju and Bi calling out from their rooms but these calls were invariably meant for Malti and not Junior Aunt. Perhaps it was for a glass of water or for food or there was a message to be sent out. Throughout the day Malti's name kept resounding in the house.

In the beginning, Malti helped Junior Aunt with her chores but as time passed she withdrew her help. Bi had been grumbling that the two of them got together not to work but to gossip. It was not long before that things reverted to their old manner and as part of it, Junior Aunt again started receiving her full share of taunts.

"*Arre*, Roshan, is your wife the only woman in the world that has ever conceived? I find her sleeping throughout the day. Is she going to give birth to a man or a demon?"

"How much of it is true and how much untrue—only God can tell. If she keeps tossing in bed there must be some reason for it. The truth will be out. When the barber cuts hair, it falls plumb in front of the man."

In the meanwhile a surprising change had come over Rajju Mian. When Bi Darogan railed at Junior Aunt he maintained a grim silence. He just looked on unconcerned. Things came to such a pass that he did not exchange a word with Junior Aunt for months. He would always call Malti in case of need. When face to face with Junior Aunt he would just throw a

glance in her direction without bothering to say a nice word to her.

That day there was nobody in the house and a heavy downpour came without warning. The roof started dripping in many places. Junior Aunt quickly collected all the clothes which she had hung out in the courtyard to dry. But the downpour was so heavy that she got fully drenched while gathering the clothes. Just then Rajju Mian came out looking for Malti and suddenly stopped on seeing Junior Aunt. They had not faced each other for many days and Rajju Mian found it difficult to retrace his steps without speaking to her. "Where's Malti?" he asked in a low voice.

Rushing back to the verandah, Junior Aunt quickly adjusted her clothes and said she didn't know where Malti was.

"*Bahu*, water has started dripping over my bed," Rajju Mian said after an awkward pause. He was about to go back to his room when he turned to look at her. "Oh, you're drenched!" he said. Her condition seemed to have touched a sympathetic chord in his heart. Junior Aunt watched him going. It was after such a long time that someone had addressed her so affectionately. This reminded her of her father. "*Choti*, can't you see that you have got wet? You could catch a chill and create trouble for me."

As if a storm had burst in her, Junior Aunt's eyes became wet with tears. She gave a deep sigh and wiped away her tears. Picking up a vesse, she entered her father-in-law's room.

It was still raining heavily, accompanied by a hailstorm. A strong gust of wind flung the window open and some things lying on the window sill fell down on the trunk below. The room had become dark due to the rain. Outside, the rain was falling in sheets and the wind seemed to have run berserk. In the courtyard the branches of the mango tree swayed wildly. The thin branches of the *bhunga* tree crackled and crashed to the ground.

Pushing aside the lamp, Junior Aunt closed the window and then lighted the lamp. The ceiling was dripping in many places. There were two gaping holes in the tiles right above Rajju Mian's bed through which water had poured over the pillow, messing up his bedding.

Lifting the lamp Junior Aunt surveyed the room under its

light. It was a small room, having just enough space to hold three cots. There were some boxes lying in a corner, coverlets made by Malti from discarded cloth spread over them. By their side lay Rajju's worn out shoes which he generally used during the rains. On the left wall Rajju Mian's clothes were hanging from a peg. On the floor by the side of a trunk a petticoat lay spread as if a woman had hastily pushed it down her waist and swiftly withdrawn her legs from out of it. Junior Aunt brought the lamp near the petticoat. Bi did not wear a petticoat. It very much resembled a petticoat which she had seen Malti wearing the other day—the same white colour and flowers embroidered in it by untrained hands with silk thread and a crotcheted border running along the lower edge of the petticoat.

But how had Malti's petticoat found its way into Rajju Mian's room? Suddenly Junior Aunt thought of Rashida. She looked around furtively like a thief, and then giving her head a jerk as if trying to bolt out all thoughts she proceeded towards the bed.

About four months ago when Malti had just arrived Junior Aunt had encountered a piquant situation whose effect had lasted on her mind for many days.

They were having their siesta. After finishing her work Junior Aunt was also trying to have a nap when she thought of checking the outer door through which stray dogs often stole into the house. As she passed by Rajju Mian's room she heard a faint sound inside his room as if someone had struck against a box while struggling to get away. Then she saw Malti emerging from his room and stopping at the door to regain her breath.

Junior Aunt had gauged the situation in a jiffy and filled her eyes with the tell-tale picture. Malti's *pallav* had slipped from her shoulder, her face was flushed and her lips were half-open through which she was breathing heavily. Junior Aunt moved on as if she had seen nothing, determined not to let her mind dwell on what she had witnessed.

A portion of the sky was visible through the window. She saw a flash of lightning like a white dazzling sheet being hurled in the sky followed by deafening thunder which struck terror in Junior Aunt's heart. She was sure lightning had struck somewhere. After tidying up Rajju Mian's room she surveyed the

result and came out.

At night when they all sat down to eat Junior Aunt kept gazing at Malti's face from behind her veil as if she was seeing her for the first time.

Malti was in a gay mood. She laughed without reason at any remark made by Bi or Rajju Mian. Her earrings shone as she tossed her head while laughing and the drops of perspiration on her forehead and on the tip of her nose glistened in the light. With laughing the bun of hair at the nape of her neck had gone askew, letting loose the jasmines threaded into it, their smell carrying to Junior Aunt.

Then she recalled that when she was making her father-in-law's bed a few articles had fallen on the floor from under his pillow. Among half-burnt *biris* and match sticks there were also some withered jasmine flowers.

A few months passed. Junior Aunt was in bad shape. She could not stand once she sat down and if she somehow managed to rise to her feet she found it difficult to walk. Blisters had formed in her mouth and she could not take in anything except milk. All that she could do by way of work was to cook food because it involved no movement.

The breakfast was ready. Malti was sitting next to Junior Aunt by the side of the *chulha* when Junior Aunt poured sizzling ghee mixed with chopped chillis and onions over the cooking *daal*. Till then Malti was all right and seemed to have no physical complaint. But as soon as the ghee smoking hit the *daal* and its smell reached her nose, she felt nausea rise. Rushing out of the kitchen she sat down over the drain and started vomiting, sending up gasps of *au, au*.

All heard her except Roshan Uncle. Junior Aunt got up and looked out of the window. Rajju Mian was sitting on the low platform, basking in the sun. He gave a start as he heard Malti vomiting and his face suddenly turned white. Bi who was emerging from the bathroom suddenly stopped at the door as if struck by paralysis. Malti, although aware that the gaze of all of them was fixed on her back could not stop vomiting.

When she got up and walked back with downcast eyes there was no one around in the courtyard. Only Junior Aunt was standing at the kitchen door watching her with fear-stricken eyes. She saw Malti slumping down heavily and resting against

the wall, holding her head between her knees.

"Malti!" Junior Aunt called. But there was no response. She called again but Malti did not raise her head from between her knees.

"What have you done to yourself, *haramzadi*?" Junior Aunt said in a cutting voice and sat down by her side. Malti hid her face between her knees and started sobbing, her body shaking with every sob. She tried to hold back her crying but it only worsened her condition.

The same afternoon Junior Aunt again heard Malti crying in Bi Darogan's room. She rushed towards it but found the door and the window bolted from inside. Bi was questioning Malti in a subdued voice and Malti, it seemed, was refusing to answer. She just kept crying.

"Tell me, yes, tell me," Bi kept saying in a muffled voice so that her voice should not carry outside the room. From Malti's cries it appeared that Bi had thrown Malti on the ground and was pulling her hair.

"I'll strangle you to death, *haramzadi*! Who has loaded your belly? Tell me. I'll find out who the scoundrel is who has done it to you and pluck out the hair from his chest."

Bi's abuses and beating continued. Junior Aunt wanted to bang on the door but she knew Bi's vile temper and refrained from interfering.

It went on for more than an hour. But Malti refused to open her lips. She just kept groaning.

At last Bi came out looking utterly frustrated and bemoaning her hard lot. She stood by the door and said in a broken voice, "Listen carefully, this cussedness of yours is not going to help you. I am saying all this for your good. If you still don't understand then go and be damned. Yes, go to hell for all I care. But go, before Roshan comes. Let him not see your evil face. If he comes to know about it he will kill you. I've warned you."

After Bi had moved away from the scene Junior Aunt quietly slipped into the room. Malti was sprawled on the ground, half naked, her face looking pinched and her hair messed up. Her blouse was torn, exposing her bosom and there were welt marks all over her body.

That evening Malti disappeared before Roshan Uncle arrived.

Except for Bi's acquaintances none of Junior Aunt's friends was keen on visiting her. There were occasions when Bi had treated them in a peremptory manner and even humiliated them and Junior Aunt had had a hard time pacifying them. So, as far as possible, she did not encourage visitors. When she met her friends at some function, they invited her as a matter of courtesy, to visit their house but she put them off with a smile or some excuse, knowing that she would have to invite them in return which was never a pleasant prospect.

She had had a similar experience with Zahira Bhabi. Whenever they chanced to meet Zahira invited her to visit her. Junior Aunt would promise but never keep her word till Zahira stopped asking.

So that day Junior Aunt was surprised when Zahira Bhabi unexpectedly called at her house.

Getting over her surprise Junior Aunt smiled and said that it was a real pleasure to have her over. "I thought you had dropped from the sky," she added. "You should have sent word in advance that you were coming."

"Why?" Zahira Bhabi shot back at Junior Aunt. "Is that the custom here? You have only to say the word and I'll go back."

"No, no, I never meant it that way," Junior Aunt put on a forced smile. "I meant you would have found me ready to give you a royal reception. And suppose I had not been at home."

"So what? I would have gone back," Zahira Bhabi shrugged. She walked in and sat down. "I said to myself you always refuse to visit and at this rate my hair would turn gray waiting for you to show up. When I married I looked fresh and young and now I have become moth-eaten and stale and a mother. During this long period you have not cared even to look in the direction of my house. So I thought I'll take a chance and gate crash."

Junior Aunt knew that Zahira was saying all this in good humour. But before she could plunge into the badinage herself, Bi came out of her room and cast a cold glance at Zahira which was sufficient indication that she was not welcomed in her house. Zahira not to be outdone, offered Bi an exaggera-

tedly polite salaam, leaving no choice to the old woman but to be polite to her. She sat down by Zahira's side. "How are you, Bi Khala?" Zahira asked. She had sensed Bi's hostile mood.

"Allah be thanked," Bi said in a lukewarm tone. "I've reached a stage in my life when good and bad mean the same to me. I'm just dragging on, ready to depart when my time is up."

Junior Aunt fetched the *paandan*. Zahira Bhabi exchanged trivialities with Bi—about the weather, the crops, about the bangle business and about what the mullah had been preaching lately. In between she had munched two *paans*. Feeling bored, Junior Aunt gave Bhabi a desultory look. It was characteristic of Bhabi that once she got started she would go on and on till she got bored even with herself and decided to call it a day.

"Where is your child?" she asked Junior Aunt. "It's a girl this time, I'm told, if my information is correct."

Junior Aunt made no reply. She just hung her head. But Bi nodded corroboration, as if saying what else could one expect from a woman like Junior Aunt.

"What name have you given her?" Zahira asked and this time again Junior Aunt looked away and aft.

There had been an unpleasant controversy over naming the girl. Junior Aunt wanted to give her a short and modish name and when alone would address her as Saliha but Bi twined up her nose at the name. "It's no name," she snorted "It sounds like any abuse. People would distort it into *Sali*. Just wait and see." And then she suggested some time-worn and odd sounding names like Naseeba, Kariman, Rahiman.

Junior Aunt said that such names were good only for maidservants. At this a storm burst upon Junior Aunt's head and she came in for a lot of castigation.

It looked, finally, as though Junior Aunt would have to eat the humble pie. She resignedly agreed that there was no point in imitating others and going in for high sounding names. However hard a goat may try, its tail would not extend beyond four inches.

"So what name have you given her?" Bhabi repeated her question.

"Saliha," Junior Aunt said in a whisper.

"Saliha?" Bhabi went wide-eyed with appreciation. "A nice name that?" she said. "She must be one year old by now. No?"

Junior Aunt told her that the girl would be two next month.

Bi listened to Junior Aunt in silence, her jaws working menacingly. She resolutely stuck to the place not budging an inch.

At last Zahira Bhabi hit upon a device of escaping from Bi. "My good woman, must you keep me tied down to one place?" she said. "Won't you take me round your house?"

It was a nice way of getting rid of the old woman. But Zahira guessed that Bi had seen through her game. She knew, in fact that she heartily disliked her and that she looked askance wherever the two of them sat together indulging in conspiratorial whispers. She had frequently glared at Junior Aunt, communicating her disapproval. Today too Junior Aunt feared that Bi would be at her old game. So she got up gingerly with Zahira Bhabi, fearing that Bi's withering remarks may anytime hit her in the face. But mercifully, nothing of the sort happened.

"Now tell me, how is the world dealing with you?" Zahira Bhabi asked, comfortably settling down in the kitchen as if now she was going to have a nice tete-a-tete and all that had preceded it so far was nothing.

"I'm all right," Junior Aunt said. "It's about you that I want to know. You look so changed.

Zahira Bhabi's face suddenly clouded and averting it she sighed deeply.

"Why, haven't you been keeping fit?" Junior Aunt asked.

It was not the Zahira or old--health, appearance, mode of dress—she looked changed in every respect. Dark circles had formed under her eyes and her cheeks which always glowed with health now looked sallow like a withered leaf.

Ignoring Junior Aunt's question she asked, "When did you meet Rashida last?" She looked at Junior Aunt, blinking her eyes like the fluttering wings of a butterfly.

"Not after *Milad*. It must be two years now. I've not met her after that. Is she married?"

Zahira Bhabi gave Junior Aunt a surprised look. "Don't you know?" she looked steadily at Junior Aunt.

"Why, has anything happened?"

"*Arre*, in which world have you been living?" Bhabi gave a painful laugh. "How could that unfortunate girl get married? Last month she set herself on fire and died."

Like a jet of water, a tremor of pain shot down from her mouth into her throat and plunging down into her stomach rippled out to all parts of her body. She was too stunned to express surprise or ask a question.

"She had come to me a week before her death," Zahira Bhabi said in the same halting tone. "Little did I know that I was meeting her for the last time or that she would take that terrible step. That day also she cried and said that death was always eluding her. She told me her day-to-day story and showed me her body. I almost swooned at the sight of it. She had branded herself in so many places. She thought that by branding herself she would be able to atone for her sins and ask for God's forgiveness. I want to disfigure my body, she said. 'It should get so disfigured that one should even loathe to touch it.' 'Rashida, what have you done to yourself?' I asked her. 'It's a living death for me,' she said, 'Though alive I'm burning in hell fire.' God knows what came over her after that. Not a week had passed when news went round that one night when all were asleep she had sprinkled kerosene over her body and burnt herself to death."

"Believe me." Zahira Bhabi said after a long pause in which we both sat grief stricken. "After Rashida's death I've lost my peace of mind. I can't even sleep properly at night. As darkness falls I am overtaken by a strange kind of restlessness. When I fall asleep I dream of Rashida. I went away from home for a few days just to divert my mind but it made no difference. I know you'll say I've gone mad."

Junior Aunt heard Bi's raucous voice, "*Bahu* can't you hear? The little one has gone hoarse with crying."

Junior Aunt rushed out of the kitchen and came back carrying her daughter in her lap. She was feeling terribly shaken from the account of Rashida's horrible end.

"How is your brother-in-law?" she asked with the idea of changing the subject.

"Could anything ever go wrong with him?" Zahira said. "He is getting on fine. Now he doesn't even have time to visit us. There was a time when he used to visit us every month. But now he drops in just once a year and makes his visits look so casual." Zahira Bhabi bent her knee and rested her chin upon it. And then as if looking across a jungle she said, "Sometimes I feel that a large part of our lives is gone in nursing illusions. We close our eyes feeling consoled that after due allowance our hand is not empty, although we may be holding only damp clay in it. The more we try to clutch it in our hand the more it slips through our fingers."

Outside, the afternoon sun was on the decline. The mosaic formed by the rays of the sun over the top of the mango tree in the courtyard had started fading.

Junior Aunt's child started crying. She rocked the child in her lap and tried to lull it to sleep but the child did not stop crying. At last Junior Aunt got up and started pacing the kitchen with the child cradled in her hands.

"Now look at his ways," Zahira Bhabi said. She was referring to her husband. "It's now ten years that we have been married. He never found fault with me all these years. But now suddenly he sees nothing but faults in me—scores of them. That I'm getting fat, that I'm slapping layer after layer of fat on my body, that I'm barren. But I don't mind for I have given him nothing in return. What really hurts me is that he did not suspect me when I was young but now that I'm advancing in years he is gone stark blind with suspicion. He even goes to the extent of spying on my movements through the window. Can you beat it? Sometimes I feel that if he can suspect me when I am innocent why not have some clandestine fun. I'm in for ignominy both ways."

"*Bahu*, will no cooking be done today?" It was Bi's voice. "Will your gossip never end?"

What Junior Aunt feared most had happened. Although Bhabi said nothing her face betrayed her feelings. Bi had given her a clear hint to leave.

The sun had disappeared from the top of the mango tree and one could hear the mooing of cows returning from the

pasture. Finding Bi standing before her, Bhabi said, "Bi khala I had not realised that it had got so late."

Bi said in a dry voice, "Naturally, you are that forgetful. Have you no work awaiting you at home? How can you afford to idle away so much time in gossip?"

Bhabi's face tingled with shame and anger, more so because she could not think of a quick retort to Bi's reproach. She gave a dry laugh and went out looking a bit humbled.

But as soon as she disappeared from the door Rajju Mian came out of his room and burst upon Bi Darogan. "This house is no place for decent people to live in," he cried. "Does one ever treat a visitor as you do? How would it have mattered if she overstayed? Heavens above would not have crashed upon you."

Bi stood there staring at Rajju as if she wanted to make sure that he had finished. Then she waved her hand in the air and said in a sharp, shrill voice, "Don't provoke me to open my mouth. Or I'll simply blow the lid off! Your doings will tell them what a decent man you are. Have I uttered some blasphemy that you have gone red in your face? And look, you have no business to stare at women when they come to our house. Calling yourself a decent man? Is this how you display your decency? Don't forget, I know you inside out. If you had any shame you would have drowned yourself that day in a handful of water."

It appeared she would not stop fulminating against Rajju Mian. And as for him, it appeared he would pounce upon her and tear her to bits, so angry he looked. But he only gnashed his teeth and tore out of the house.

Today as I sit down to read the *fateha* for Rajju Mian, with Junior Aunt sitting by my side, I am painfully reminded of the last days of his life.

He felt utterly lonely and desolate after Bi Darogan was gone and he had completely cut himself off from Junior Aunt during the last one and a half years of his life. Leaving aside the last two days when he was nearing his end, Junior Aunt never came in his presence nor did he go into the inner apartment.

As he lay in his cot in the outer verandah he would

complain against Junior Aunt to anyone who was willing to him his ear. He complained that she did not give him proper food in his old age and created all sorts of difficulties for him. He had had fever for weeks together and yet nobody took any notice of him—not even a child came to enquire after his health. Food was thrown to him like a bone to a dog. And things had come to such a pass that as a last resort he had taken to cooking his own food. He had resigned himself to all this, thinking that they were taking it out on him for some past injustice he had done to them.

Junior Aunt would gloss over everything and hear him in silence with bowed head. Outsiders, not being concerned with their private affairs, surmised that Junior Aunt must be responsible for everything that went wrong in the house. After a long illness when he was going to seek admission in the hospital he had glanced into the inner apartment and finding no one there had called for Junior Aunt. At last she came and they stood face to face, waiting for the other to break the ice. Eventually Rajju Mian spoke.

“*Bahu*, I’m going to the hospital.”

Junior Aunt gave him a cursory glance and then stood there with downcast eyes.

“I don’t have proper treatment here. *Bahu*...” he abruptly stopped and then said in a choked voice “... and I’ve brought you a bad name. I feel now that the time has come for me to present myself before Allah. I must set myself right before it is too late.”

“Mamu when did I say ...”

“No, no, you need not say anything,” Rajju Mian interrupted her in an impatient voice “It’s I who must crave your forgiveness.” Rajju Mian started crying. Junior Aunt put the end of her sari into her mouth and moved away from there.

Rajju Mian never returned from the hospital. A month later his body was brought home wrapped in a white sheet of cloth. With great trepidation Junior Aunt removed the sheet from his face but she could not behold his face. She looked at his face for a fleeting moment and pulled the sheet over his face. Then she beat her breasts and screamed.

“Son, let us change the *rotis*,” suddenly Junior Aunt looked at me.

Rajju Mian's *fateha* had been said. The *rotis* were lying there and getting stiff.

Though I was still sitting my mind was not there. It had wandered far away.

PART TWO

The Wandering Feet

SUMMER was on its last legs.

The saal trees had shed their rust coloured pentagon-shaped flowers on the earth and their branches like arms raised towards the sky, were waiting for the first shower of the season. As far ahead as one could see the saal flowers lay thickly strewn under the trees.

The tamarind flowers falling in great profusion had formed a yellow carpet in the courtyard. The red *jaimangal* flowers swaying on their branches looked like bright clay lamps. They kept falling all night and had to be swept away in the morning.

The sun had appeared only for a short time in the morning and the sky had remained overcast with dark clouds for the

rest of the day. Then the wind suddenly rose and myriads of dry leaves resting under the trees floated in the breeze like homeless creatures.

It was day like any other in my life. In those days I also used to knock about aimlessly like those leaves tossing in the breeze. That is the only memory of those days that still vividly lingers in my mind after such a long time. I would sneak out of the house in the afternoon when everyone was having a siesta and wander around the whole afternoon. I would lie in the mango grove with my hands serving as a pillow under my head. Or I would loiter in the thickets of jamun and tamarind trees, singing tunelessly, the tangled branches of the trees weaving a canopy over my head . . . Or, I would untie a boat from the bank of the Dalpat and jumping into it let it drift over the water for hours. If the mood overtook me I would jump into the water and hunt for water chestnuts.

More than these escapades, Mohsin enjoyed playing with his catapult most. I often fell into his company. A rubber catapult in hand, he would stalk about looking for chameleons. Although I was a cipher at this game and could not even bring down a mango after trying the whole day I just kept company with him.

It might well be the hottest of days and my throat feel parched as if thorns had grown in it. But Mohsin would show no signs of relenting. Hiding behind mango and tamarind trees he would shoot down one chameleon after another—red mouthed, big headed, black ones and yellow ones, all of them of different species.

“How many?” he would ask, throwing a casual glance in my direction. Since I played the role of his camp-follower, it was my job to keep count of the chameleons. Not that Mohsin did not keep a count himself. He asked me just to ascertain whether I was impressed or not. I would make a quick mental calculation and tell him fifteen or twenty, whichever seemed close.

“Is that all?” his eyebrows would go up in surprise. “There must be many more. Count again,” he would order.

When I told him that I had given him the correct figure, he would start counting from the beginning of the hunt. “Listen. I brought down one from the neem tree, one from the banyan

tree, a third from a mango tree and then on and on. How many do they make?"

I would count with him or I would just stand there watching him at his sport.

"All right, I'll kill five more and then call it a day."

He would resume his walk in soldierly strides, swinging his catapult in the air as he walked, confident that I would fall in step with him. I had to, even if unwillingly. If I refused I knew I would come in for his taunts. He would call me a weakling, a mama's boy, a nincompoop and make fun of me. Sometimes he pinched my cheek and asked, "Are you a boy or a girl?"

With false bravado I would go dragging my feet behind him. Whether sleepy or thirsty I would just keep smiling and would not leave till he permitted me to do so.

It was not surprising if in the end I got fed up of the whole thing. To watch a red-headed chameleon swaying its head happily from behind the branch of a tree and then seeing it scurrying away after being hit by Mohsin's catapult, with Mohsin in hot pursuit of the injured creature, his catapult held taut between his hands--these had lost their novelty for me. By now my enthusiasm had also sagged. I wanted to stay away from this unbecoming game.

One day while returning from the bazaar I ran into Mohsin. I wanted to give him the slip but he caught me. "Why have you stopped coming to hunt?" he asked me.

"I don't like it." I said in a respectful voice.

"Why don't you like it?"

"I hate to kill chameleons and lizards. There is no point in killing a living thing. It may be fun for you and I but not for them."

"Oh, I see," Mohsin gave a sarcastic laugh and then holding my arm twisted it forcefully. "Son, since when have you learnt these Hindu ways?"

I did not like his calling me son but he was holding my arm and the way he was twisting it I feared he may break it.

"Leave my arm!" I said. "You may break it."

Mohsin laughed and let go of my arm. Rubbing his hands as if he was washing them off me he said, "All right, go, I'm letting you off this time. Go home and play with dolls."

Tears came to my eyes, more from humiliation than pain.

I stood there for a while rubbing my arm and watching Mohsin walking away with a swagger like a hero. I wiped my eyes and made my way home.

I thought I had made an enemy of Mohsin. He might stop talking to me and speak about me to others in slighting terms. But things happened just the opposite of what I had feared.

When I met him a few days later I found that his behaviour towards me had completely changed. He was very polite to me which he had never been.

He was eating something. After exchanging a few words with me he dived his hand into his pocket and took out a handful of eats. "Here, have them," he said.

I couldn't refuse.

"You are like a brother to me and yet you quarrel with me." A taunt, but there was no malice in it. His jaws still working, he looked intently at me.

I could not understand the implication of what he had said but I could not muster courage to ask him to be more explicit. I thought he was right in what he had said: all friends are like brothers.

"I don't fight," I said. "It's you who's fond of twisting my arm."

"Oh!" Mohsin laughed. "I did it just in fun. But why do you keep on defying me? Come, I'll tell you something important. It's because you're my brother." He looked around by way of caution. "There's a reason why I kill chameleons" he said lowering his voice. "Very few people know it."

"What's the reason?"

"Do you know what a chameleon is?"

I shook my head.

"It's an enemy," he said in a contemptuous tone. "My Abba said that a chameleon was instrumental in getting our Prophet arrested. The Holy Prophet was hiding in a jungle to escape from his enemies. With his entry into the jungle the bushes had been trodden upon leaving a trail behind which the enemy could follow and catch him. So he requested a spider to hide him by weaving a web around him. A spider is a helpful and merciful creature and hence she readily obliged him. Nobody would have known our Prophet's whereabouts but for a chameleon which was standing near him. It indicated

to the enemy the Prophet's presence by jerking its head. The enemy got the 'cluc and arrested the Prophet. It's an act of piety to kill a chameleon."

Whether true or false, I found Mohsin's story quite interesting. I even felt jealous of him. He would be rewarded for his acts of piety while I would be denied this privilege. I decided I would learn to handle a catapult. Then I visualised a chameleon drenched in blood, writhing in agony on the ground and dying a slow death. My enthusiasm for killing it vanished. "Let Mohsin reap all the rewards," I said to myself, "I'll have nothing to do with such wholesale destruction."

Mohsin had thrown his arm across my back and was almost dragging me along. I looked intently at his face and then my gaze slid over his body. I wanted to know in what manner this youth who was taller and stronger than me and who could kill the 'enemy' at one shot was otherwise different from me. Was there some secret tucked somewhere inside him?

"Do you know that you are my cousin?" Suddenly Mohsin withdrew his arm from my back and holding me across from him looked me in the face. Then without waiting for my reply he said, "I myself didn't know it. But yesterday when I was talking about you to my mother, on hearing your name she asked me to describe you. Then she asked me your Abba's name. I did not know his name but I told her where he lived. Do you know what happened next?" Mohsin started laughing.

I slowly shook my head, proclaiming ignorance. I thought Mohsin was going to tell me something startling. But he only said, "My Amma started crying and said that I should never beat you for you were my younger cousin. I was surprised at this piece of information and said that if you were our cousin why didn't you live with us? Anyway, it did come to me as a revelation that your Abba is my mother's elder brother. It makes you my maternal cousin."

Mohsin's talk was mystifying. In the first place I could not understand the relationship between us. But when I had figured it out, that I had an aunt who had a son named Mohsin who was standing there in flesh and blood before me. I just found it a bit bewildering. Why had I remained in the dark about it till now? Why had not Mohsin and Aunt ever visited our house? And for that matter, why hadn't we visited their

house? Or, was it that Mohsin had spun a yarn to retain me as a friend?

But that made no difference. I was in no mood to kill chameleons. "Mohsin, I'm not going with you on your hunting expeditions," I said. Mohsin's face darkened with rage. "Who's asking you?" he said in a gruff voice. "I can kill them single-handed. What help were you to me, anyway? All you did was to run behind me."

I felt that the whole matter was unnecessarily taking an unpleasant turn. "Believe me, Mohsin," I said in a placatory tone, "I want to come with you but I find killing a loathsome act. Don't laugh at me. I feel like crying."

Mohsin guffawed at my remark and as if out of pity, thumped me on my back. "That's why I say you should have been born a girl. You became a boy through some mistake. You are indeed a cry baby. Come, would you like to eat wild plums?"

We passed by the compound of the Primary School. A plum tree standing in the middle of the compound was known for its sweet fruit. The only snag was that the tree too high for us and there were only a few boys who ventured to climb it, Mohsin being one of them.

Although it was getting late for me to return home and I was afraid of the dark I could not say 'no' to him.

I was still filling my pockets when Mohsin climbed down and bit into a plum. "Sweet, aren't they?"

By now I was completely in his strangle hold. I nodded in approval and said in a cringing tone, "Mohsin will you teach me to climb this tree?"

He laughed. "Asking me? But I've told you it's not a girl's job. Come, I'll take you home. Are you coming?"

I had known Mohsin for a long time but we had always met in the school or at some other public place. Although I had seen his house from a distance I had never had the opportunity of entering it.

"Is there some special purpose in visiting your house?" I asked him.

"What do people do at home?" he said. "We'll go home, that's all. Sit with me for a while and then leave."

I was getting late and besides, I was afraid of going to a

new place. So I evaded him by saying that I had not left word at home and Abba would be angry if I reached home late.

"Then don't come. As if I care." He carelessly shrugged his shoulders. "Only she wanted to meet you. She said she had not met you for a long time."

This time I pricked up my ears. Here was another mystery that his mother had met me before and now wanted to meet me again. But when and where? I knew nothing about it. I was in a fix and just kept looking at Mohsin. To go or not to go—I just couldn't make up my mind. "All right, Mohsin, I'll come some other day," I said at last.

"But which day?"

"Any day."

"That's no answer. May I tell Amma that you'll be coming tomorrow?"

For an instant I lost my cool. I felt myself incapable of taking a snap decision. It upset me. But since I found Mohsin's eyes fixed on my face I had perforce to come out with an answer. I willy-nilly agreed to come the next day and left.

I was restless the whole of the next day. Mohsin's words kept ringing in my ears and I could not sleep well. Perhaps I had not done well by ending the meeting on that note of uncertainty. It was the first time that someone had invited me to his house with such warmth and I had proved to be such a let-down. I was not even aware of my importance among my own relatives.

I had always found Abba in a hurry as if he believed in hustling through life. Immediately on getting out of bed he would be in a hurry to leave the house. Seeing him always on his toes one felt it was his house, not because his family lived here but because his clothes and other things were kept there and because he had nowhere else to sleep at night except under its roof.

As soon as I woke up in the morning I invariably saw him sitting on the big stone slab in front of the bathroom. After telling mother to get him his soap and towel he would disappear into the bathroom. Till Abba left home everything was done at a breakneck pace, plunging the house in utter confusion and drinking mother out of her wits. She ran frantically about, attending to father's every need with special care. And

yet something or the other went wrong—the bath water was not of the right temperature, either too hot or too cold. Or there was no toothpaste left in the tube, or the tea was cold like sherbet and did not even warm the lips. He would get into a vile temper, throwing tantrums right and left so that everybody's mind would go numb with fright. He bellowed like mad so the thick lines appeared on his forehead and the veins on his neck stood out. He would start throwing out any article that came to hand. On such occasions we children would slink into a corner to keep ourselves out of the range of his vision.

This was happening most of days. Rare were the days when he left for his office without making someone the target of his wrath. And he returned so late at night that we were invariably asleep by the time he came and were not even aware of his coming.

Amma's behaviour was even more queer. She had no time for us as long as Abba was in the house; her hands were always full with work. But when she had a respite from work her manner was so cold and stand-offish that we did not feel encouraged to go and sit with her. She would lie down in her cot, covering her face with her arm. God knows what she kept thinking about.

In the beginning when we did not know her mind we would sit with her and try to draw her out into conversation. But she was generally apathetic to our overtures; she would keep looking at us with a blank expression. Or she would give us a tired look and then close her eyes. Sometimes she would even push us away. "Don't be a drag on me, for god's sake she would say irritably. "Go out and play."

I could even tell how many times I had seen mother smiling or falling into a good mood. I could also count on my fingers the times when Abba had sat with us and freely chatted with us, forgetting the cares of his office. While getting ready for office he would enquire about our studies and games and how we generally spent our day.

"Abba, please get me my Geography book," Sophia would timidly ask him. "I've been asking for it for a long time but nobody seems to care. The teacher says that if I don't bring it next time he will turn me out of the class."

"I'm not left with any exercise book," I would venture,

taking a cue from Sophia.

Sophia being younger to me Abba was indulgent to her and she turned it to good account by making extravagant demands on him. She would even try to get into his lap. "Yes, yes, I'll bring all the things in the evening," Abba would say gently, pushing her aside and would trot out of the house.

But that day, I realised that those few moments when Abba was accesible to us would not be sufficient for me to unburden my mind to him. To talk to him about it in passing would be doing crass injustice to the matter. Last night too I had kept awake in the hope of finding an opportunity of talking to him. But then I had fallen asleep. It was about Mohsin.

Like other days I would have liked to stay in bed a little longer but I was getting impatient. I kept hovering around Abba. Yes, I must give him a surprise. Amma was busy with her morning chores and Sophia was still sleeping. I tried to suppress my happiness that none of them knew my secret.

"Hurry up!" Abba said. "I overslept and you did not even wake me up." He looked at the sunlight spread over the courtyard.

"I tried but you just kept sleeping," Amma said, coming into the courtyard from the verandah. She lifted the lid from the pitcher to see if the water was of the right temperature for Abba's bath. Abba disappeared into the house.

"Has the rabbit been fed?" he enquired coming back. "Why is the monkey looking so glum? Look will someone give her water to drink?"

Wrapping a soiled cloth round the neck of the pitcher of warm water Amma laboriously leaned over it and holding it with her two hands carried it towards the bathroom on heavy feet. The task safely accomplished, she squeezed the water from the edge of her sari. "First attend to your work," she said to her husband, straightening her back. "Don't bother your head about the monkey. She is given to chattering throughout the day."

"Do you want her to die?" Abba said testily. "If one keeps pets one should take proper care of them."

"I'm not bothered," Amma said nonchalantly. "As if I've nothing else to do except look after monkeys and bears!"

Abba stood there glaring at Amma. He would have gone

hammer and tongs at her but Sophia saved the situation in time. Flinging herself out of her bed she rushed up to the tap and served water to the monkey. Mollified, Abba went in to have his bath.

I was feeling disappointed. Another opportunity gone. But as Abba returned from his bath, his demeanour once again revived my hope. After putting on his clothes and lighting a joss stick, which he did every morning as a rule—in whose name I could never know—he had a few moments to himself and I kept hovering round him in the hope of catching his eye. I would have succeeded but for Amma who pulled me up for coming in her way when her hands were full in the morning.

“Yes, what’s it?” she barked at me. “You have stuffed your belly with food. Your job is done. What more do you want? Go out and play. That’s what you do the whole day, don’t you?”

I could do nothing except look sheepishly on, though I was deeply hurt. I wouldn’t have felt half as bad if she had slapped me. What did she mean? Was I hovering around her for love of eating?

Abba had sensed that I wanted to speak to him. He stopped eating and looked at me. “Yes, what’s it?” he asked.

I was feeling so humiliated that I was almost on the verge of crying. Although Abba asked me several times I refused to come out with what I wanted to say. No, I won’t tell anybody—neither Abba nor Amma—no, not even Sophia.

I quietly slipped out of the house and made for the bazaar in the hope of meeting Mohsin there. I would have liked to visit his house but was reluctant to do so unless he renewed his invitation. But as luck would have it I did not meet him in the bazaar.

Going back to the *mohalla* I walked drearily on, still hoping I may yet meet Mohsin. It was nearing ten and people had come out in the streets bound for their offices or the court. Abba was among the early birds. Why did the others play the Late Latifs? Maybe, they spent more of their morning time with their children regaling them with stories. Well, what kind of office did Abba go to?

I had recognised Mohsin’s house from a distance. It was near

the big pond. I slowed down as I neared his house. The outer door of his house was closed and I could not hear any sound coming from inside. I stood there for a while looking around with uncertain eyes. I could not decide how to call him out. If someone else whom I did not know came to open the door it would prove too embarrassing for me.

Then I heard the sound of footsteps and knew that someone was coming to open the door. I acted just in time and retracing my steps stopped near the culvert from where I saw a middle-aged man wearing coat and pants emerging from the house. He quickly turned round, called out to someone from the door and then stepped onto the street. I had never seen Abba wearing such clothes. More strange he did not even wear pajamas. He wore them only on Fridays when he went to the mosque to say his namaz. Otherwise, I always saw him in a dhoti.

I looked at the man intently as he passed by me. Tall and slim, short curly hair dressed on the left, bright shrewd eyes, his upper lip covered with thick moustache—all told, an impressive face. I thought he could easily pass for a school teacher. Although I had never seen him before I guessed that he was Mohsin's father. But how was he related to me? I uttered the word 'Uncle' to myself just to savour its sound.

"How are you, son?" A heavy hand fell over my shoulder. I turned round startled, though I knew it could be none else but Mohsin. There was a naughty smile playing on his face. I felt piqued. He had again called me son. I ignored his banter for I was happy to have met him. He was in a shirt and shorts, a catapult held in one hand, his pocket bulging with small, smooth pebbles. The colour of his face as usual was high.

"Where are you coming from?" I asked him.

"I was having a stroll along the tank." He fitted a pebble into his catapult and aiming it at a house let the pebble go. Then he saw his Abba coming and hid behind a bush.

"Your father?" I asked him.

"Yes."

"Since when have you been away from home?"

"Since morning." He laughed and swung his catapult in the air. "Come, let's go and have breakfast. "He walked a few

steps and then turned back to look "Aren't you coming?" he asked

I looked at his face, unable to give a definite answer and then I fell in step with him

Although the front door of his house was open and was nearest to where we were standing, Mohsin preferred to make a detour through a side lane which was unevenly paved and full of puddles because of the recent rain, and entered his house by the back door. I hesitated at the door, but Mohsin, who knew my timid nature dragged me in

"Ammi see who is here?" he called while I walked behind him like an intruder. I knew the woman he had addressed as Ammi was my aunt. Her body draped in a white sari from her ankles to her head, she was fair, of medium height and had big grave eyes. Her hair was tightly brushed back and gathered in a bun at the nape of her neck. Her body was laden with silver and gold ornaments.

She drew near me and steadily gazed at my face. Then she caressed my head and said with a tremor in her voice, "Could one believe that you're the same Babbhan?"

My mind was in a whirl. It seemed to be churning words which failed to find expression.

"Come in my child, come in." She threw her arm round my back and led me into the kitchen.

There were many small children in the house. But it presented the appearance of a well-swept neat and clean house. What a contrast, where there were only two of us from our house and my sister. But even a casual glance was sufficient to show in what disorder our house lay.

Vegetable skins, scraps of paper, empty cigarette packets and tin foils are strewn all over the verandah. Over a cloth line stretched across the verandah hung soiled and discarded clothes while unwashed utensils lie heaped near the door. Nobody has cared to remove them to a corner by the wall.

How many brothers and sisters are there in the house? Mohsin, Shamim, Rubina and

"Sallo, look Babbhan has come!"

Before I could glance in the direction of the door, a big girl.

in a rustling a-sweeping *garara* (a pyjama skirt, going down to the ankles) appeared on the scene. She smiled at me and I lowered my eyes. I guessed she was Mohsin's sister, Saliha Apa. As if letting us into a secret, Mohsin laughed. He was sitting apart from others. "Amma, he's such a shy bird!" he said.

His remark greatly embarrassed me, more so when I heard Sallo breaking into a laugh. I could not bring myself to look at her.

"Have you met Babban before?" Aunt asked Sallo.

"No."

"How could you?" she sighed deeply. "Such is my fate. The irony of it, my parents and my in-laws live in the same town. Abba kept asking for me all the time but I could never visit him. And then he died. Even when Amma was alive I could not spend more than two days with her. Now only brother and wife are left and I have not met them for years together."

I did not raise my head. I only guessed from her voice that tears had come to her eyes.

"But nobody is going to believe me. Nobody..." Aunt said in a choked voice and then trailed into silence. But it seemed that behind that silence many emotions were fluttering to find expression. Although that day Aunt and Sallo sat there talking with me a long time I could not discover what had created such a wide gulf between our two families.

That day I quietly entered Abba's room. Darkness had descended and lights had come on in the house. Amma was busy with her chores. Had she been around I could not have dared enter Abba's room. Sophia would have run up to Amma and told on me, and Amma would have turned her wrath on me. The fact was that none of us was allowed to enter Abba's room without his permission. For that matter I had rarely seen Amma sitting or lying in the room. Maybe she went in our absence or when we were asleep.

I lingered at the door before entering. The room looked so unfamiliar to me. If someone had left me there blind-folded I would not have easily believed that this room was a part of our own house, the house in which I was born and had grown up.

The room looked so different from the whole house as if this room belonged somewhere else; there was nothing common

between it and the house. While the house remained in total disarray all the time his room was neat and in apple-pie order. It had spotlessly clean white-washed walls and a cemented floor, a milk-white cloth canopy hanging under the ceiling. A four-poster of solid *sheeshum* with peacocks carved on its woodwork stood in the middle of the room. A few select pictures hung on the walls of which a picture on a calendar drew my immediate attention. It was hanging right in front of the bed.

Walking stealthily like a thief I came near the bedstead and felt the bedding with my finger tips. It was so soft and cosy to the touch. A faint fragrance of flowers and scent rose from the bedsheets and the pillow cases. I wondered why there was such a glaring difference between his and Amma's room. Why didn't she ever enter this room by day or night? Many such questions came to my mind to none of which I had an answer. The whole atmosphere of the room seemed eerie as if some thing startling could happen here any moment, throwing me off my balance.

"What are you doing here?" I asked myself while standing before the big calendar. Was there some mysterious link between this room and the doubt that had suddenly risen in my mind the other day when I was visiting Aunt's house? I closely studied the picture on the calendar. It was a beautiful picture, indeed. A beautiful woman, the ends of her sari held between her teeth was removing her blouse. Although she was trying to cover her body with the end of her sari, she was almost half naked. By the side of the calendar hung the smiling portrait of the film actress Kajjan Bai. Slightly disappointed, I opened the boxes and looked into them. In one box there were some documents, pins, pens, pencils and like items of stationery. In the other box lay neatly folded woollens, silks and valuable brocades. "Son, your grandfather was a hereditary rich of the Bastar Court." Aunt's words, which she had uttered long ago suddenly echoed in my ears. "There was a time when golden roosters proclaimed his name, heralding his arrival in right royal manner. And now see what your Abba has come to..." Where are those golden roosters of yester year whose voice is now stilled for ever?

I turned over the garments in the box. They were such a fascinating, eye-catching, lot—Banarsi saris, brocade

turbans and caps, small velvet vests, sherwanis, ladies head gear and the like. A keora fruit which must have been kept in the box to protect the garments from the ravages of insects had long since dried and disintegrated. It lent a touch of antiquity to the garments.

I gave a start as I turned the blackened leaves of the keora fruit. My eyes had landed on a picture book lying under the leaves which had so far escaped my notice. It was a man and a woman. But what was novel about the picture was the way the man and the woman had been shown together. I was so intrigued by the picture that I picked up the book and turned over its pages.

On each page great secrets hidden behind a thousand curtains unfolded themselves before my eyes. Everything was so unexpected and sudden that my eyes blinked shut of their own accord.

When I came out of the room my hands and feet were trembling. I could not muster enough courage to glance at Amma and Sophia. I felt as if I was guilty of some serious misdemeanour.

That night my sleep was disturbed by Amma's sobbing. A dim light was burning in the room and though in its dim lights I could not see faces clearly, from their shadowy outlines I guessed it was Amma sitting in bed, crying, and Abba standing by her side, uttering comforting words to console her. "Sometimes you are so adamant. You must try to understand."

"Is there anything left to understand at my age?" Amma said in a choked voice. "Better explain things to that bitch after whom you are running like a dog in heat."

Abba stood in silence by her side. It was surprising that even after such a serious allegation he had kept himself. Only his body shook imperceptibly and then it froze into immobility.

Amma said in a tearful voice, "Why have you brought this for me? Better take it and throw it in the river. If I'm saying anything wrong then spit on my face. There are other men in the world. Do they all behave in this outrageous manner?"

"How many other men do you claim to have known?" Abba asked in a sharp voice.

"Ten of them!" Amma straightened up, looking very tense

and then added, stressing each word, "And I'll go in for ten more! Are you listening? Yes, ten, twenty more."

Amma paused for a moment, took a long breath and then said with a tremor in her voice, "When I was young and could have had my flings I wasted my youth, placing my head at your feet. And now it hardly matters . . ."

"Here, keep this money," Abba said, trying to mollify her.

"Haven't I told you? Take it away and give it to that bitch." Amma said in a sharp voice, pushing away Abba's hand. "I can't manage the house with ten rupees. But if you can you're welcome to it."

Abba stood silent for a while and then picked up the money. "If you don't want the money then go and be damned?" he gnashed his teeth. "But next time if you ask me for money I'll pull out your tongue."

"Whom are you trying to frighten? I can do without your money. But what about your children? They will starve."

Abba glared at Amma as if at a loss for an answer. Then he said in a voice loaded with contempt, "It's because you are a low-born. Had you been from a respectable family you wouldn't have been so foul-mouthed."

"Oh, yes, I know the hall-mark of your respectability—the respectable things that you do. Why are you trying to sneak away? Let me wake up the children and tell them about your doings. It will be good fun for them. How long can you go on posing as an innocent, hornless calf?"

"Won't you shut up? You shameless woman" Abba who had turned to go, thundered at Amma.

But there was no stopping Amma. She kept muttering, returning retort for retort till it came to an open skirmish. Abba caught Amma by her hair and fell her on the bed. He gave her blows and even a kick and left the room fuming.

Sophia was sitting in her bed watching the whole thing with frightened eyes. But I kept lying in bed, holding my breath. I had never heard Amma using such filthy language. "May you be ruined," she wailed. "I'm telling you, your youth will recoil on you like the plague. Not even a street cur will care to sniff at you."

I had no sleep that night. Again and again I thought of those pictures in Abba's box. They had such a lurid effect on

my mind that I kept tossing in bed. I don't remember how long this phantasmagoria continued. I only remember the morning breeze which had at last lulled me to sleep.

"Why, don't you like it?" Mohsin extended his hand before me on which a dead sparrow lay. He smiled. The bird's beak was open and its eyes closed. A drop of blood had clotted near its neck where some feathers had come off.

"Did you kill it?" I asked him.

"Yes, there are more of them." He said putting the catapult round his neck like a garland. He took out two more dead birds from his pocket and placed them on the ground before me. "A male and a female bird," he said. It was a gruesome sight.

"You were right," Mohsin said. "It's no use killing chameleons. It serves no purpose."

"What will you do with these sparrows?" I asked him in a low voice, thinking that this time again he would come up with a story as in the case of the chameleons. But Mohsin just laughed. Removing the catapult from his neck he held it in his hand in the shape of a 'Y'. "Do you see it?" he asked, pointing towards the 'Y' shaped wood of the catapult. There were blobs of red on the joints and other parts of the catapult. "What are these?" I asked.

"Blood," he said throwing out his chest, "As soon as the birds start fluttering and writhing on the ground I smear catapult with their blood."

"Why?"

"It improves my aim. That's why."

"But you had already perfected your aim on the chameleons."

"Silly, chameleons have very little blood in their bodies."

I could not believe Mohsin. I knew Mohsin's tongue never faltered when telling gruesome details. We walked some distance in silence, the rustling of the saal leaves fallen falling on the red gravel chasing us. When Mohsin did not stop at the end of the road which forked off to his house I knew he meant me to follow him to his house. I had been to his house twice before and I had taken a liking to Aunt and Sallo.

"There's another consideration, besides," Mohsin said in

a low voice. "Do you know what these sparrows are?"

"No, I don't."

"They are bloody Brahmins." Mohsin looked away in contempt. That reminded me of something that had happened just the other day.

Our school had closed for the summer vacation but many of us class fellows used to gather there in the evening. We met mostly in the playground and played according to the schedule laid down by the school during its normal session. Unfortunately, a few days back Mohsin had had a row with a Brahmin boy in the playground. The boy was not sturdy and was given a good thrashing by Mohsin. Nothing further happened that day. But a few days later when Mohsin was roaming about in the mango grove three boys fell upon him and gave him a good beating. They mauled him so badly that he had to apply lime and turmeric paste to his wounds. From that day Mohsin had stopped hob-nobbing with Brahmin boys. So much so that he had even developed an aversion for Chobey, a simple, well-meaning school master, all because he was a Brahmin.

I clearly remember that after this thrashing Mohsin had stayed in his house for a couple of days and at last when he stirred out of his house he spent the whole day in planning how he would take his revenge from those three boys. Two more boys whose temperament matched his also joined him as reinforcement. They went about carrying electric chords tied round their waists but nothing came of their plan. He learnt subsequently that these boys had gone to other towns and villages to spend their vacations.

Mohsin gnashed his teeth on hearing the news and from the next day started killing sparrows.

"This way," suddenly Mohsin prodded me in my arm and as was his habit, walked on without giving me any clue. As we turned to the left the compound of his house came into view. But instead of walking through the gate or going in by the back door he took a third course which led into the house through a gap in the broken wall. A large part of the compound which had two small outhouse—like structures and a godown—like affair, in a way partitioned it off from the main block of the house. A solitary widow lived in one of the outhouses.

Carefully walking through discarded cigarette cartons which had turned black and through shards of glass and heaps of broken bangles I stopped in the middle of the compound.

The godown adjoining the outhouse in which the widow lived was stored with paddy and the widow had been let out the outhouse just to keep an eye on the paddy.

Although I kept asking him what it was all about, Mohsin collected some cowdung cakes from the front of the widow's door and then proceeded to gather some dry fodder and sticks which lay scattered about. Heaping all the things together he took out a match box from his pocket and lighting a match by striking it against a stone set the heap ablaze. Asking me to mark time, he disappeared into his house.

He returned holding a saal leaf on which he had put salt and chilli powder.

"What's all this?" I asked.

"Just watch," he said. "And don't interrupt me when I am on the job," he admonished me. "Just watch!"

He stirred the cowdung cakes making sure that they were properly ablaze. Then he took the three dead sparrows from his pocket, plucked their feathers and put them on the fire to be baked. When the tiny bodies were satisfactorily baked he sprinkled salt and chilli powder over them. "Eat!" he said placing a sparrow on a saal leaf and holding it out before me.

It had never occurred to me that one could eat a half-baked sparrow and such a tiny sparrow at that. I thought Mohsin was joking. But as on other occasions he did not wait for me. He picked up a sparrow from the saal leaf and popped it into his mouth. Crunching on it with his teeth he bit into the sparrow in two and munched on slowly. I even forgot to blink.

From then on I developed a great aversion for Mohsin. I felt like snatching away the baked sparrow from his hand and hurling them on the dust, trample them underfoot. But I was not capable of doing it. I realised I would be no match for Mohsin, far stronger than me as he was.

When I came out there were tears in my eyes at my lack of manliness. I vomited as soon as I reached home.

PART THREE

Tranquility

OF all the members of the family cousin Sallo was the one with a marked individuality. Tall, slim, wheatish complexion, small even teeth which showed to great advantage when she smiled, and a sharp nose. Her eyes and curly hair were gifts from her father though her mother had denied her, her complexion. She was the darkest of her brothers and sisters. Her temperament however was very different from that of her father, mother, sisters and brothers.

It seemed rather strange that though it was Mohsin who had befriended me, it was his mother who had invited me to their house. In course of time they were both relegated to the background and Sallo Apa drifted closer to me. In the begin-

ning, she had remained a bit aloof and I also had felt shy of her. Later she would herself come to sit with us when I was sitting with Aunt and express her approval of my remarks or her mother's by a gentle nod of her head or by a smile. I would feel awkward when left alone with her as if I had been caught in a difficult situation.

Mohsin's ways and modes of dress were those of a member of an affluent family while in contrast, I was always rather poorly dressed. I had never marked this disparity before coming to Aunt's house. When Aunt left Sallo and I alone I was put with an embarrassing situation. I had a feeling that Sallo was smiling at my cheap and threadbare clothes. If I sat with my legs drawn up I would keep brushing down my knickers just to cover my thighs or I would spread the front of my shirt over my lap. This nervousness lasted till one day Sallo dragged me to her room.

Usually I used to go to Mohsin's house in the afternoon and come away after spending an hour or two with him. It was now for over a month that I had been visiting their house but all through this period I had never had the occasion of meeting Uncle. He spent the whole day at the office and I left before he returned home.

But that day as chance would have it, I was still in the house when I heard his footsteps outside the house. Mohsin was not at home and Aunt was cleaning rice while Sallo Apa was sitting by her side, grinding spice on the grindstone. Sallo gave a start as she heard his footsteps and stopped grinding as if to confirm that it was none other than her father. "Abba has come!" she said to her mother in a nervous voice and got up.

Aunt raised her head with such a violent jerk that her hair came untied and tumbled over her shoulders. She looked towards the door as if something untoward was going to happen. Sallo Apa came rushing towards me. "Get up, Bhaiyya!" she said.

Before I could understand what was going on here she pulled me up from my seat and dragging me forward pushed me into the kitchen. "Stay here till I call you," she whispered in my ear.

Sallo and Aunt were gone before I could utter a word. After a while I heard Uncle's voice and then saw him sitting

down on a stool in the verandah. Aunt was bending over his shoes, untying its laces. After loosening the laces she sat down on the ground in front of him and taking his feet in her lap pulled off his shoes and then removed his socks. Uncle followed her into the room and returned after changing into a *tehmat* and *banian*.

After sometime Sallo Apa came into the kitchen and putting her finger on her lip cautioning me not to make any sound, she held my arm and led me out by the other side.

By now it was clear to me that she was trying to keep me out of Uncle's sight. But why? Was I such a contemptible creature as to be unworthy of Uncle's notice? Would my sight have offended him?

I looked at my clothes. As on other days, today also I was not very cleanly dressed. In the morning after my bath I wanted to change but Amma would not let me do it. "We don't have a dhobi," she had said. "You have got hands. Wash your clothes yourself and wear them". But the fact was that she was saving on soap and I had willy-nilly gone to Mohsin's without changing.

I felt depressed as I reviewed the situation. I stretched the end of my shirt to remove its wrinkles and felt no better as I examined the result. As I passed through the door, Sallo's hold over my arm slackened and I pushed away her hand. "Apa, stop dragging me," I said testily.

Ignoring my sulko, she led me into her room.

"This is my room," she said. "Do you like it? I'm going to hang some pictures on this wall. I've collected a lot of pictures. Care to have a look at them?"

My reply, it seemed, did not count. Sallo Apa opened her trunk with great alacrity and spread before me cuttings from many magazines. "Tell me, which ones you like most?" They were pictures cut out of film magazines, all of them of male and female film stars. In those days I was very fond of seeing films and though I had liked many of the pictures Sallo had spread before me, I was, for no apparent reason not in a mood to proffer my honest opinion on them. "I don't like any of these," I lied to assert my superior taste. "They are no good."

But contrary to my expectation, Sallo Apa showed no resentment at my remark. Even her expression did not change.

"Why, I believe some of them are quite good," she said. "Just have another look." She smiled and then made some comments in support of her contention but I did not hear her. In fact my thoughts were elsewhere I feared 'lest Uncle should stray into our room. The man, in jacket and pants and dark moustaches. I had seen sometime before, was still hovering in my mind.

Sallo Apa's room was neater and better furnished than other rooms. It was not cluttered up with tin canisters and other junk. It's window opened out, allowing more light into the room. The contrast between her neat bed and my slovenly one made me squirm. A visitor to our house had to pass through the room in which I slept. It often happened that a friendly neighbour or some one familiar unexpectedly dropped in just after my cot had been put in the room and I would jump out of my bed in great confusion. If I got sufficient warning I would quickly roll up my bed and slip out of the room. But if the visitor burst in upon me without giving me time to bolt, I would pretend that I was asleep. I had to face an awkward situation either way which I would have wished to avoid if I could.

"Sallo! Where's Sallo?" It was Uncle calling from the courtyard. Sallo threw the pictures down and ran out as if in panic.

"Where's Mohsin?" Uncle asked in a commanding voice. Perhaps Sallo had professed her ignorance about his whereabouts. "So you don't know!" Uncle thundered again. "Your mother has no time to keep an eye on him and you don't seem to be concerned either. And meanwhile that fellow is fast degenerating into a vagabond. Should I give up my job and keep running after him? He has already given the go by to his studies. He is bound to slog as a yokel behind the plough or end up as a peon."

"Why, what's happened?" Aunt asked in a timid voice.

"What hasn't happened?" Uncle turned back on Aunt. "He has been regularly skipping school and today I learnt that he has not paid his school fees for many months. Out of regard for me, the school teacher has paid the fees from his own pocket to prevent his name from being struck off the rolls. But this scoundrel has even overlooked showing him his face because he has no money to pay him. He has squandered away all the money."

They heard Uncle in silence. He still kept muttering, making Aunt responsible for ruining Mohsin. Although she knew him to be a wastrel she still gave him pocket money, so indulgent was she to him. She had given him full freedom to visit restaurants, and indulge in all sorts of extravagances. She would even go to the length of lying that Mohsin was studying in his room while the fellow was absconding from home and would turn up late at night after attending the night show. Abba feared that the boy had now completely gone to the dogs, that there was no way of putting him back on the right track.

Aunt and Sallo Apa dared not contradict Uncle. He kept fulminating against all of them and then quietened down, lapsing into a sullen mood. The house had suddenly become quiet and I felt uneasy sitting alone in Sallo's room. It seemed as if all the inmates had deserted the house and disappeared for good. Thoroughly bored, I kept pacing up and down the room till I saw Sallo coming towards the room in a rush. Seeing me standing in the door she frantically waved to me to get back into the room. "Babban Bhaiyya, will you do me a favour?" she asked in a sweet voice as she entered the room.

I nodded my head.

She edged closer to me and patted me on my cheek. "You won't mind it, will you?" she said looking into my eyes. Her soft hand from which rose the smell of garlic burned my cheek. She had never come so close to me, nor ever touched my face in this manner. I looked up at her face. From the glint in her eyes I found it difficult to read her mind. "You won't mind it?" she repeated. "You have to go now, Babban Bhaiyya. But you will come tomorrow afternoon, won't you?"

My face fell. I felt it beyond me to make any reply. . . I stood mute, looking into space and then quietly slipped out of the room. Sallo Apa again stopped me and extracting a promise from me that I would turn up the next day, she asked me to wait and left the room. She cautiously looked around the courtyard. "Yes, you may go," she said coming back to the room.

But what she had feared came to pass. I had hardly reached the courtyard when I saw Uncle coming out of a room, wiping his hands on a towel. I shook like a criminal as his eyes fell upon me.

"Who's this?" I felt Uncle's eyes were scrutinising me. Aunt who was coming out of the kitchen suddenly stopped in her tracks and Sallo Apa who was proceeding towards the courtyard looked apprehensively ahead. I stood forlorn in their midst looking very foolish. I had no question to ask, no answer to give.

This time again it was Sallo Apa who saved the situation. "This is Babban," she said boldly, coming forward. "Babba, Uncle's son."

"Which Uncle?"

Sallo Apa told him my father's name and then stood there with downcast eyes, as if she was gathering strength to weather a storm. I was almost on the verge of tears.

Uncle once again gave me a stern look and sat down in a chair in the verandah. "What has he come here for?" he asked.

This question was more difficult than the previous one but Sallo Apa again rose to the occasion. "He's studying in the same school with Mohsin," she replied. "He came here with him."

Uncle again gave me a hostile look as if he wanted to convey to me that to come to his house was not my only crime but also that I was Mohsin's friend. I must also have had a hand in making Mohsin a vagrant. But without making any further comment he got up from his chair and returned to his room.

The tears which I had held so far back suddenly flowed from my eyes. I cursed myself for being so timid. A fellow like me, I said to myself, deserved to be humiliated. What great business had I to go to Mohsin's house?

I felt angry with everyone as I reached the road. I decided that Uncle, Aunt, Mohsin and Sallo were all of them, third rate persons and I would shun them like the plague in future.

But the next day as my anger abated I laughed at my resolve yesterday. I felt I was utterly lacking in patience and forbearance. For another reason if Uncle was not prepared to accept me or any other member of my family why should I hold it against him? I could not even fault Aunt or Sallo Apa on that account. For that matter, Sallo was a nobody in the

family. She was an unmarried girl who was totally dependent upon her father. Even then she had gone all out to save me from humiliation.

The summer was on and it had been unbearably hot for the past few days. The sun blazed for sometime and then the sky would become overcast, making it sultry and humid. It became so close that not even a leaf stirred. After my humiliating experience at Aunt's place I did not go out for many days. Although it was painful to recall that event I would still lie on my charpoy, brooding over the whole thing. Much as I wanted to share my experience with the other members of my family, I kept it to myself, determined to bear my agony in silence.

Amma who had been watching my strange behaviour for the past many days asked me why I remained cooped up in the house the whole day. She had just finished her chores and her face was wet with perspiration. She looked very tired.

I was not prepared for her question. Before, when I went out of the house in the afternoons and did not show up till the evenings, she complained that I was given to loafing around in the sun. I thought she would be pleased at my staying indoors. But on the contrary, it seemed to have only annoyed her.

"I can't understand this boy's wayward ways," Amma said as if she was addressing a third person. "Either he knocks about day and night or stays put in the house like a girl. Good children have some sense of proportion and conduct themselves as the occasion demands. Look at other's children. How robust they are. They make such a pleasant sight. And look at this weakling. . ."

What is good health? What is the secret of their health? Why didn't I have any liking for games or for the rough and tumble of life? I perceived my own body—tall and lanky, thin bony wrists and spindly legs. Was I really so weak as to make a pitiable sight? What must Sallo Apa be thinking of me?

"When are you going to get your new text books?" Amma broke into my reverie. "You think these books will put on legs and walk to your house?"

My vacation was coming to a close but till now I had not given any thought to the buying of new books for the next class. It was my practice to buy second hand books from students who had been promoted to the higher class. But these books became

dog-eared with use and bore ink stains. I wished to acquire brand new books but second hand books meant considerable economy. Perhaps that was why Amma was asking me to act betimes before these second hand books were pinched by other boys.

"I'll go today," I replied and came out of the house.

The sunlight was glinting on the road like a mirror. Upto the crossing from my house the road was treeless. There were some trees beyond the crossing but the houses ranged along the road provided better shade than those trees and I could walk in their shade even barefoot.

Only a few days ago the sun had not burnt the skin as it did now. I usually walked to Mohsin's house without in any way being discomforted by the heat. But not now. Was it that my health had deteriorated since then? Good that I had not visited Aunt's house for the last so many days. If Sallo Apa had put me out of her mind she would not have sent me word through Rubina.

A thin smile played across my lips. I felt reassured. I was, however, in no hurry to go and meet Sallo Apa. I just marked my time though I knew that if she had pressed me hard I would have found it difficult to resist her. But by not visiting her I was taking it out on her for that day's incident.

"Babban Bhaiyya, are you annoyed with me? But don't forget I'm older than you in age. I've even the right to beat you. Why haven't you visited us after that day? We have received a basket of pomegranates from our village. And of course, you know what delicious mangoes grow on the tree in our courtyard. But I haven't even touched them. I thought we shall eat them together when you visited our house next time."

She had sent this letter through Rubina. From the same letter I had learnt that Sallo and Mohsin had fallen out over some matter and were no longer on speaking terms. I had lost count of the number of times I had read this letter. I would have gone to meet her immediately on getting her letter but then I recalled what Amma had said about the purchase of books.

"What are you loafing around for?" a school-mate of mine sitting in a shop in the bazaar asked me. But I took no notice of him. If I had stopped I could have settled with him about

the books. But I walked on wilfully. Of late I had developed a strange perversity. It gave me great pleasure to do just the opposite of what Amma had asked me to do. If she had not reminded me about the books I am sure I would have explored the possibility of buying them from my school-mate. And Abba? What was my assessment of him?

I found my feet dragging me towards Mohsin's house. Soon I was standing in front of his door.

It was a hot afternoon and the sun was blazing directly over my head. The doors of the houses in the street were closed. The road ahead lay steeped in silence and from far away quietude seemed to be drifting towards me from under the *neem* and *peepul* trees. Nearby only a few sparrows were twittering in the branches of a *kaner* tree.

I timidly called out for Mohsin, and followed it up with a gentle knock at the door. After a few moments the door slowly opened and I saw Sallo standing in the door way, and adjusting her head covering. "You, Babban!"

I had stopped paying her formal respects. I just threw the hint of a smile at her. "Is Mohsin in?" I asked.

It was Sallo I wanted to meet and it was just a ruse to ask for Mohsin in order to hide my keenness for her.

"He must be somewhere in the house," Sallo said in an indifferent tone. "Won't you step in?"

I was in no mind to refuse and walked in. The house lay steeped in silence. Per'aps Aunt and the others were having their siesta in the inner room. On the plinth lay a heap of utensils waiting to be washed. "They are all asleep," Sallo said, seeing me looking around. "Please step this way. Even if I keep awake the whole night I can't sleep in the daytime."

Dragging my feet I sat down like a guilty person. Sallo pulled up a mat and sat down on it in front of me. "I thought you won't come," she said.

"What made you think so?"

"Because you are angry with me." Sallo Apa started laughing. "But what else could we do that day? You know Abba, of course. He is so unpredictable. I thought the best way out of the predicament would be to keep you out of his sight." "Was I at fault in any way?" I asked.

"No, no," Sallo Apa replied quickly. "That you're Uncle's son is enough to displease him."

I thought I was now getting nearer to the secret. That also explained why Aunt never visited us. A wide gulf seemed to lay between our two families. One day Amma came to know that I had been visiting Uncle's house and warned me that if Abba came to know about it he would break my legs. When I asked her the reason she became furious. What would have been the consequences if I had told Amma that I would persist in visiting them? In fact just out of cussedness I had decided that I would visit them that very afternoon, just because Amma was opposed to the idea.

Sallo went into the inner room but soon returned. "Sorry, the mangoes are all finished," she said. "but we are still left with the pomegranates. They are quite good. Come, we shall sit over there."

I suddenly recalled Apa's letter. She should not get away with the impression that the greed for her mangoes and pomegranates had brought me to her house. "Forget about it, Apa," I said "I don't have fancy pomegranates much".

"Why forget them?" she said, giving a toss to her head which made her look more vivacious. "Don't you like pomegranates?"

"Yes, I do. But I've no craze for them."

"Then who's crazy over them? I?" Holding my arm she made me get up and dragged me behind her, laughing. I thought that being older than me by a few years she was full of understanding and I could safely open my heart to her. But how to proceed in the matter?

We had crossed the lane and come to the back of the house where three barn-like structures stood at the end of the compound. "Amma says earlier they were used to store paddy," Sallo said, pointing towards the structures. It was here that Mohsin had baked sparrows on slow fire. I contrasted the loneliness of that afternoon with the stillness of today's afternoon. It was so hot that the heat seemed to be piercing through the flesh and drilling its way into the bones. The whole barn looked deserted and seedy. As for greenery, there were only a few yam's plants growing along the compound wall. Had there been a neem tree

in the compound it would have been a great boon, for one could spread a mat and lain down in its shade.

Sallo momentarily ducked under the shade of a structure allowing me to catch up with her. One of the structures had a partially white-washed courtyard, making it look cleaner than the other structures. Apa climbed its verandah and picking up an old jute bag spread it on the floor and sat down on it. "Sit down," she said, shifting a little to make room for me.

The stillness of the afternoon sounded so strange, the *thuk, thuk* of a distant water mill which created the illusion of a woodpecker at work, adding to the weirdness.

I felt embarrassed, sitting alone with Sallo Apa. A faint smell was wafting from her body which became pronounced when she moved her body. Her clothes rustled as she shifted her legs at which I closed my eyes.

"Have some." Sallo Apa cupped her hands in the shape of a lotus flower and placing some pomegranate seeds on them extended them towards me. "Taste them," she said. "They are delicious."

"May I ask you a question?" I said in a low voice. I had already formed in my mind the sentence that I was going to say.

"Yes, what's it?" she asked, turning the pomegranate seeds on her tongue.

"Why don't you ever visit our house? Why does Aunt start crying at the mention of Abba's name? Why is Uncle annoyed with me?"

"*Hai Allah!*" Sallo Apa curved her little finger like a half moon and put it under her lip. "So many questions all together? Bhaiyya, you said you wanted to ask me only one question."

"But I've asked you only one question."

"No, no, the questions are many though the reply to all of them is the same."

I looked at her face questioningly and she gave me a quizzical smile. Then she placed her hands between her knees and looked into space, slowly swaying her body.

A big, sturdy tree stood at the other end of the compound wall, yellow flowers hanging from its branches in thick clusters. Sallo directed her gaze to the tree while I waited for her reply. The reply came in a slow and faint voice and it was confined to two words—"Family feud."

"What was the feud about?" I asked. "Families do have misunderstandings. But that does not lead to such bitterness that they even refuse to see one another."

Perhaps Apa did not expect that I would pursue the subject in that manner. She gave me an intense look and then smiled. "I don't know really. Better ask your Amma. It has something to do with the elders."

I still persisted, trying to draw her out as best as I could by attacking her from many vulnerable points until I succeeded in cornering her.

"But you are too young to understand," she said at last finding herself cornered.

"No, you just tell me. I'm mature enough to understand."

"No, you're still a child."

"Who? Me a child? But how did you manage to get the hang of the whole thing? You're also young."

"My case is different," Apa laughed. "For one thing, I'm much older than you."

"So what?" I said looking disappointed. "A few years this way or that don't make much of a difference. Of course, if you don't want to tell me that's a different matter altogether."

Apa gave me a bemused look. I could see that she was enjoying teasing me. The more I fretted the more she smiled. At last when I tried to get up, looking very tense, she pulled me down to my seat. "Sit down," she said. "Don't be so fretful. Why should you rack your head over these trivialities? Instead, at your age you should be more concerned with your studies."

I sat down suppressing my sense of triumph, knowing that even a faint glow of triumph on my face would undo everything, like a bucket of water drawn from the well tumbling back into it just when you are about to catch it to pour water.

"Have you ever been to your Abba's room?" Apa asked after a long pause.

"Yes, I've been to his room."

"Did you see anything special?"

I sat thinking for a while. Abba's small room which I had visited only the other day vividly came to my mind. And then as if in a flash, came to me that picture book, and my face

turned red with shame. What else was there in the room? I thought of telling Apa about the book but then I changed my mind. It would have been too embarrassing to tell her about it.

Seeing me hesitating, Apa drew her *anchal* over her face in order to hide her smile.

"Why don't you tell me? You've certainly something to tell. Speak up."

"The book," I said hesitatingly.

"What book?"

I sat there mum. I thought for an instant and then lowered my head. My lips trembled. "It's a bad book, Apa," I ground out the words. "It has some very dirty pictures."

Sallo looked at me in surprise and then asked me in an inquisitive voice, "Where is that book?"

"In Abba's box."

For a while she sat with lowered head as if lost in thought. "I don't mean that," she said.

"Then?"

Sallo drew closer to me. She put her right hand over my head and holding my face with her left hand she leaned over me and put her lips over my ear, murmuring something all the time. It happened so suddenly that I did not even get time to collect myself. Then I felt her soft palm caressing against my chin and two hot lips resting on my ear. I felt a strange sensation rippling through my body and my eyes closed as if in a state of intoxication.

I even forgot the question that I had asked her and what she had mumbled in reply. When my ear stopped tingling and the turmoil in my mind abated, my eyes opened and my mind returned

"A woman," she murmured.

Suddenly I became tongue-tied. I could not understand which woman she was alluding to. Yes, which woman? Where did she live? What had she to do with Abba's room? Where had Apa seen her? Many such questions swarmed my mind.

After whispering the reply in my ear, Apa had edged away from me but the distance between me and her had lessened. I could even see the soft down on her cheeks. I felt now she was regretting for letting me into her secret.

"I don't know," she said tersely. "I had not gone there to meet her. I only know that she sometimes visits your house. In fact she was the cause of the quarrel between my Abba and your father. They even came to blows in the street. That was many years ago. Since then they have not talked with each other. And all this time Amma has been pinning to meet her brother, I mean your Abba, all this time."

I was sadly disappointed. How she had been beating about the bush for such an inconsequential thing. She could have as well told me about it in passing without making such a song and dance about it.

I said, "If what you say is true why haven't I seen her in all these years?"

"How could you?" Apa laughed. "You must be sleeping when she comes. Besides, she must be visiting him on the sly. Haven't you ever seen your Amma getting into fits of anger?"

"No, I'ven't seen my mother getting angry with Abba." I said.

I was wondering what was there to be angry about? Or the reason for adopting such a hush-hush attitude over it? All sorts of people came to our house. Abba was connected with the court and he had to deal with a lot of people. What was so strange about it if one of them happened to be a woman?

"*Bhaiyya*, she is not a good woman," Apa said in a severe tone. "Mother says she is the cause of discord in your family. She will bring ruin to the family. Your land and property are already gone and now your Abba throws his money on her, leaving just enough for you people to carry on from day to day."

So Apa knew everything. She also knew that we were having a hard time of it and our family life was greatly embittered. That day I had gone to Sallo wearing a thread-bare pair of knickers. It was made of cheap cloth and had got frayed at the edges and with repeated mending it had risen above my thighs. Even the stitching had come off and when Apa's gaze marked the offending spot over the thighs I tried to cover it with my hand. To save me from discomfiture Apa pretended as if she had seen nothing which made me feel all the more uncomfortable.

I looked at Apa from the corner of my left eye and found

her gazing at the yams in the courtyard. The pods were still falling from the *shirish* tree although there was no wind. Was our family really heading for destruction?

"Apa," I said in a low voice, "Do you know the reason why she visits our house?"

Sallo Apa sharply turned her head towards me, a faint smile playing on her face. Then she rested her head against the wall and closed her eyes. "No, I don't know the reason," she said.

The sun had lost its fierceness and the shadows had lengthened. "Let's go," she said, suddenly getting up and adjusting her *dupatta* over her bosom. "I'm late," she said. "Amma must already be fretting."

She stopped at the end of the lane. "Now tell me one thing," she said.

"Yes?"

"A short while ago you mentioned a book in Uncle's box. You did, didn't you?" She paused for a moment and gave me a meaningful look. "What's that book about?"

My lips seemed to have frozen over my mouth. I didn't know how to evade a reply. "Apa, it has very dirty pictures," I said.

"Can you show them to me?" she asked in an eager voice. I looked at her nonplussed. I had never realised that she could be so bold. I saw no way out of my predicament. "They are not worth seeing," I said lamely.

"Why? If you can see them why can't I? Look, when you come tomorrow bring the book with you. Understand?"

Apa swiftly walked away without giving me a further chance to speak. The smell from her *dupatta* hung in the air till she disappeared round the corner.

I slept badly that night. Even when I closed my eyes sleep kept evading me and my mind kept drifting towards Abba's room. Was what Apa had said really true? Did things really happen that way? But how could she know without ever having stepped into our house whereas a boy like me, fool though I was, was ignorant of everything in spite of being a part of the house? After many hours of mental tug-of-war when I was sure that everybody had gone to sleep I tip-toed to Abba's room.

Abba's room was closed from inside and there was no light in it. I stood outside the door looking an utter fool. I was all ears for even the slightest sound. At last totally disappointed I retraced my steps like a thief.

There is something called an inner urge. We set ourselves against it and yet in spite of ourselves this inner power compels us to do a certain thing; there is a touch of inevitability about it. And then we blame it on our lack of will or irresoluteness.

Something similar happened with me. I was in no way prepared to carry out Apa's behest. I was dead set against it. For one thing, it amounted to stealing something from Abba's box, and for another, I was most reluctant to show a book of this kind to Apa. From the very start I had made up my mind not to comply with her request. But the next day when I proceeded towards Apa's house I was carrying the book under my belt. So that the book should not bulge out from under my shirt I kept it pressed down against my stomach.

"Have you brought it?" Apa asked with a sign of her eyes, avoiding Amma's gaze. I smiled and lowered my head as if nothing was going on between us.

Apa was sitting near the grinding slab. She quickly finished grinding the spices and got up, adjusting her clothes under her elbows, her hands being smeared with the wet paste. "Come", she said washing her hands. "How about having some guavas?"

It was apparent that Apa wanted to have me alone with her. The guava trees were on the left side of the courtyard and came in for Mohsin's attention more than others. He thought nothing of denuding them of their fruit. I could spot a few guavas on these trees but Apa made no attempt to pluck them, saying that they were beyond her reach.

We sat down at the back of the house. After indulging in some inconsequential talk, Apa yawned and said, "Babban Bhaiyya, can you take me to your house?"

"Why?" I looked at her in surprise. One day I had myself invited her to visit our house and today she had herself made the proposal.

"What do you mean why?" she said. "Can't I visit your house if I want to? Must there be some special reason for it? I would.

love to meet Uncle and Aunt and see your house. For that matter, it is as much my house as it is yours."

I was pleased at what she had said though I kept my feelings to myself.

"And as for you, you can't even do a small job for your Apa," she complained.

"What job? Tell me, have I ever refused you?"

"What about your promise of yesterday?" Apa paused for a moment. Then she looked at the bulge in my shirt. "What are you hiding there?" she asked.

"Its nothing, Apa," I said trying to smooth out my shirt. But I knew that I had already lost the game.

"Yes, I can see something," Apa insisted. "What are you hiding there?" Apa caught my hand. Though I struggled hard, she succeeded in putting her hand under my shirt and pulling out the book. I was sitting with downcast eyes, perspiring profusely when I heard Apa saying in a tremulous voice," "Oh, Allah!"

I looked up and saw the book lying open in Apa's lap. Her face had turned red and her bosom was rising and falling rapidly but her eyes were still glued to the book. Then she became conscious of my watching her and quickly throwing the *anchal* of her *dupatta* over the book, she nervously glanced around and then started staring into space. I noted that the tips of her ears had turned red and beads of perspiration stood on her lip under the nose.

"Sallo Apa!" I called her in the tone of a criminal. I was regretting having acted in this foolish manner; I shouldn't have shown her the book. What if she showed the book to her mother? What would her mother think of me and my family? I would lose face before her.

A stray cow stole in through the compound gate and proceeded towards the barn in front of which fodder lay piled up. Sallo rushed after the cow. It took her about five minutes to drive away the animal and close the gate.

"Didn't I tell you that it is a dirty book?" I said as she returned after closing the gate. "But for your insistence I wouldn't have shown it to you. Give it to me. I will put it back where it belongs."

But Apa refused to part with the book. She had myste-

riously hid it somewhere, for I did not find it in her hand nor concealed under her *dupatta*. "What book are you talking of?" She gave me a mischievous smile.

"The one I gave you just now. Which else?"

"But I don't have it." She waved her empty hand in the air and gave me a quizzical smile. My face fell.

"Stop joking, Apa," I said in a pleading voice.

Sallo Apa started laughing. "How can I produce it when I don't have it?" she said, brushing down her clothes.

Had she not said it in a jocular tone I would have started crying.

Looking at my pitiable condition, she placed her hand on my shoulder. "So?" she said. "Don't be a faint-heart."

"Give me back my book."

"What will you do with it?"

"Why, I'll put it back from where I got it."

She looked at me for a moment and then looked away. "Let it remain with me for sometime," she said in a careless tone. "Take it some other time."

"What will you do with it?" I asked. I was getting apprehensive of Aunt.

"Nothing."

"Then?"

"Then what? Nothing as I said."

I thought it futile to labour the point. It seemed to be leading me nowhere. Sallo Apa just kept smiling. For fear of being refused which would have been so derogatory to my self respect I thought I would suffer for my folly rather than lower myself in her eyes.

As we returned to Apa's house the first person I ran into was none other than Aunt. A shiver ran through my body. Girls are such fools. It would not be beyond Sallo to flaunt the book in her mother's face. My eyes remained fixed on Sallo. To my great relief, she went straight to her room without exchanging any remark with her mother and then on returning from her room, she got down to her chores like a dutiful girl.

"Babban!" Aunt called me in a grave voice. She was going towards the courtyard.

My fear was still clinging to me. Perhaps the worst was coming. I froze in the place where I was sitting.

"Will you come here? Just for a minute." Aunt quickly disappeared into her room and I heard the sound of heavy boxes being shifted about.

"Yes, Aunt." I stood in the door of her room and saw Aunt bending over a box. She turned to look as I announced my presence and then signed to me to walk in, without interrupting her work.

"So, this is the place," I said to myself as I surveyed that dark and dingy room. So this is the four-walled enclosure where for years Uncle's and Aunt's isolated moments have been stirring into life and becoming eloquent in the form of words. The same walls, the same ceiling lined with dark tiles and bamboo rafters and darkness brooding over the room like mist. There was the same damp smell of decay and mildew. Do these things ever tell what their invisible and half-closed eyes had been witnessing in this room?

"Where were the two of you all this time?" suddenly Aunt turned round and asked. She let the lid fall over the chest and then locking it securely she came towards me holding something in her hand.

"Aunt, I was here all the time," I said quickly to allay her doubt. And then I blurted out, "We were sitting behind the house."

"All right, tell me honestly, will you convey to your mother exactly what I ask you to?"

My mouth suddenly went dry and it seemed thorns had again grown in my throat. So I was going to get it, after all. Sallo must have tattled on me. In one swift glance I tried to find out what Aunt was holding in her hand. But the light in the room was so dim that I could not make out anything.

"So you promise?"

"Yes, Aunt."

Aunt paused for a moment and looked intently at me. "Is it true that last evening you people went without food?" she asked in a sympathetic voice.

I looked at her startled. I never expected her to know the last detail about what was happening in our house. We were no doubt blood relations but we had remained estranged for the past many years, and yet she knew more about our house than I did. Then why was I hesitating in acknowledging the

truth? Why did I feel that I would look small the moment I was confronted with this question? I just nodded my head in dumb confirmation.

"Is it true that brother has been absent from home for the last two days?"

I was silent.

Like a broken branch of a tree, Aunt leaned against the wall for support. She sighed deeply and then said in a strained voice : "God only knows what your family has in store for itself. Every step is bringing it nearer destruction. He goes on committing folly after folly, bringing his family to the brink of disaster. God knows when sense will dawn on him."

In the dim light I could not see Aunt's face very clearly but her choked voice had constricted my throat. I wanted to speak but I had nothing to say, so overwhelmed was I.

"Here, take this," Aunt who till now was leaning against the wall stood straight and handed me a ten-rupee note. "Give it to your mother. Tell her it's from Aunt." And not a word to Sallo about it."

Without waiting for my reply, Aunt walked out of the room, leaving me behind, clutching the note. I stood there dazed, for the time to refuse was long since past. Thrusting the note in my pocket I came out feeling dwarfed in my own eyes.

Sallo came to the door on the pretext of closing the door after I had left. "Your book is with me," she whispered in my ear as she stood leaning against the door. "You can have it when you come tomorrow."

Then she banged the door shut.

A house in which no food is cooked haunts the mind even in daytime for it is fire that provides the sap of life to the house. Perhaps it is the hearth that radiates happiness and joy, brightening up the whole house. Otherwise there is hardly any difference between a house and the wilderness.

Think of a house with clean rooms filled with new and old furniture and household articles. One glance and you know there is a family living in it. And then some invisible hands whisk away the happiness and gaiety from under its roof. It is the same house and yet how dreary, sad gloomy it now looks.

I wearily push open the door and enter. It is my own house and yet it looks so unfamiliar and alien. As of old the sunlight

is still sprawled over the house and yet darkness seems to be flapping its wings over it. It does not give the impression of a house but of a dead body which has gone cold and has been removed from the bed and laid on the ground for eternal rest.

The doors of all the rooms are ajar. There is no one around. The air entering from the front wafts through to the back of the house, undisturbed. Is a house called a ruin only after its walls have crumbled down? What do they call a structure which though intact is yet hollow from within and strikes terror in one's heart the moment one steps across its threshold?

Khut! Khrrrrr!

I looked up startled and saw a tin rolling down on the floor, making a clattering sound. It came to a stop in front of me. A shiver ran down my spine. And then I saw Sophia framed in the door like a ghost. She looked unkempt and unwashed as if she had been crying and had just tumbled out of bed.

“Bhaiyya!” she said in a feeble voice.

I looked expectantly at her. The breeze forced itself in, flapping against the screen hanging in the outer door and rushed away towards the courtyard at the back of the house. The neighbour's hen which had hatched fifteen chicks was pecking at the grain near the verandah, clucking persistently. It appeared she had strayed into our house by mistake, its brood running after her frantically, clucking wildly. Breaking the graveyard—like afternoon silence a crow cawed in the mango tree and then lapsed into an eerie silence.

I heard no sound near the door. Sophia's silhouette had vanished from the door, leaving its frame empty.

Casting a glance at the tin that had been kicked into the room I proceeded towards the verandah at the back where Amma generally rested in the afternoon. While going, I looked into the kitchen and saw the ash scattered on the floor. The kitchen looked so bleak and cold that I felt my foot would turn numb with cold the moment I stepped into the kitchen.

Amma was lying face down on a loose string cot, the *pallav* of her sari stretched over her body. At this point of time I have only a vague recollection of the whole thing but I clearly remember that I had some difficulty in waking her up.

She at last uncovered her face and looked at me. Her face looked so dry and bloated. "What do you want? Food?" she barked at me, without sitting up.

I did not pay any heed to her question for it was her harsh behaviour that I was thinking of; it had really hurt me. But before I could say anything she added in a still more bitter tone. "There's no food to eat. But I've still some flesh left on my bones. You people sit down around me, dig your teeth into my body and tear off the flesh."

I could not believe my ears. I just gaped at her, feeling slighted and humiliated. Why did all the people in the house think me so mean and heartless? Did it mean nothing to them that I tried my best to keep out of their way and smothered my feelings? Why couldn't they appreciate my forbearance?

Wordlessly, I took out the ten-rupee crumpled note from my pocket and placed it on the edge of her cot. "Aunt has sent it for you," I said.

I wanted to get away before I exploded with anger. But then I saw Amma sitting up in her cot and wildly staring at the note. "Which Aunt?" she asked. "The younger one?"

"Yes."

"Have you been to their house?"

She knew from my silence that I had been to their house. "Did you go there to beg for alms?" she asked. "So nice of you, indeed! Go and shout from the housetops that we are starving. That we want public dole. But even that will not put your Abba to shame. For us he is as good as dead."

"All right, I'll return the money," I said. I proceeded to pick up the note from the edge of the cot but Amma forestalled me. "Don't touch it!" she cried. "Let it remain where it is. I know your magnanimity. With what face will you return the money having accepted it once?"

"Of course, I can return it. I had not asked for it. She gave it to me on her own."

"Don't worry," Amma jibed at me. "The day is not far off when you'll be driven to begging for money."

I could not stand it any more and left in a rage. The note was still there burning a hole in the cot. Amma's remark about begging had terribly rattled me. It rankled in my mind for a long time and I would be brooding over the matter for hours.

I wanted to give my family a surprise by doing something dramatic which would fill their minds with remorse for their unfeeling behaviour towards me. Why not run away from home without leaving a clue? Or write a long letter to my parents and then jump into a well or drown myself in a tank?

And then a strange vision erupted before my eyes: My dead body has been taken out of the well and laid out on the parapet. A big crowd has gathered round my dead body. People are pushing one another, creating a regular stampede to have a closer view of my body but the police prevents them from coming near. While elbowing one another, they make all sorts of conjectures.

"Whose son is he?" asks one. "From which family, *Bhai*?"

"I don't know," the other replies. "But how young! And imagine, committing suicide at his age!"

"Oh, how innocent he looks! And how lovely!"

Suddenly Abba tears through the crowd and stands before my dead body, panting. His hair flying, his shirt slipping down from his shoulders, his face in a daze, he stares at my dead body for a moment and then collapses over it, crying, "Babba, my son!"

Everybody is there: Sophia, Sallo Apa, Mohsin, Aunt. Everybody is there except Amma. Even though such a calamity has taken place she has not come out of her house. She is lying in her room, its door bolted from inside. She is not even crying, for no sound of crying emanates from her room...

"Bhaiyya!" My reverie broke. It was Sophia calling me. She had been searching for me. "Amma wants you to have your food. She has got some food for you."

My subsiding anger again flared up. Maybe because Sophia was trying to mollify me.

In deference to my ego my attitude hardened. "You go and eat" I said in a dry voice, looking away. "And leave me alone."

"Why won't you eat?" Sophia asked me in an authoritative tone as if asserting her nearness to me.

"I've told you once, I won't eat," I cried. "I'm not here to answer your whys and hows."

Sophia went away, scowling. Then I heard Amma saying, "If he doesn't want to eat, leave him alone. When he is hungry his belly will itself beg for food."

My eyes brimmed with tears I felt helpless and lost. There was no one in the house whom I could claim as my own. They were all till talkers and their sympathy is mere lip-service. The parents who try to understand their children are cast in a different mould. They are indulgent to them and even overlook their lapses. The scene again returned to my mind. I saw Abba wailing loudly over my dead body and Sophia beating her breasts in lamentation while Amma sat before my dead body with downcast eyes, her hair tumbling over her shoulders in disarray. People were taunting her for being so heartless. "Can a mother be so cruel?" they said. "An assassin! She doesn't bat an eyelid!"

I don't know when I dozed off resting my head against the wall. When I woke, I found myself flailing in darkness. Sophia was shaking my shoulder to wake me up.

I sat up in a huff. Sophia sat down by my side and said in a beseeching voice, "Bhaiyya, come, I'll serve you food. You must eat."

There is a certain way of speaking which demolishes opposition. I could not resist Sophia although I pretended to be angry.

"Amma is crying," Sophia said in a choked voice.

"Why?"

"I don't know. She just keeps cursing her fate and if I ask her, she tells me nothing. Bhaiyya, what's wrong with Abba?"

"Why, what's happened to him?"

"He has not come home for the last two two days."

Two days back a peon from his office came to our house. Abba was having his food at that time and got un-nerved on seeing the peon. For some time he sat lost in thought and then got up, leaving his meal unfinished. When Amma asked him to finish his meal, he lost his temper and screamed, "Eat, eat, with both your hands. You must feel pleased that I've got it in the neck!" Amma kept asking him the reason for this sudden outburst, but he was in no mood to explain. He only said that the time had come when he would be handcuffed and put behind bars.

I was stunned and my face turned white with fear. I wanted to see the expression on Sophia's face. "Let me see you," I said dragging her under the light.

A bed lamp was burning in the third room which was generally used for storing junk and where Sophia slept in the afternoon. The room seemed to be enveloped in stillness.

Did I really belong to some other family? To my great dismay I did not know what was happening in my own house.

"Then what happened?" I asked her in a trembling voice. From her expression I could see that she must have felt alarmed at my own look. She was silent for a while and then turning her head towards the lamp she said, "I don't know what happened after that. Abba has not showed up since then. Haven't you noticed that Amma has been running about these two days?"

No, I had not taken any notice of that Amma had been doing and where she had been going.

"She had been to Trivedi Uncle and to Abba's other friends," Sophia said. "They went high and the low in search of him and after a good deal of running about, they learnt that he was safe, anyway. It was only then that we felt a little relieved. Trivedi Uncle came this morning also but you were not at home at that time."

Where was I at that time? Must have been loafing around. And imagine, I was not even aware that such a calamity had befallen our family. Could anybody believe it? I felt dwarfed before Sophia, from a sense of guilt and shame.

"Sophia, where's Abba now?" I asked at last.

"I don't know," she replied hesitatingly. Then she cast a swift glance at me and lowering her head stood straight in front of me, as if there was nothing more left for her to say.

"Amma said that a few days before he was taken away he was all the time shouting on her."

"Why?"

"He said we are living beyond our means 'Where am I going to get those extra five rupees every day?' he barked at Amma. 'Your house is a bottomless pit which even lusts for government money.' Amma said that she spent only on the barest necessities. She was not squandering money by any means. And who had asked him to invite trouble by embezzling government money?"

"Why, has he been misusing government money?" I asked in amazement. I felt as if the whole house, its ceiling, walls,

furniture and even Sophia had started revolving before my eyes. They were revolving at the same speed at which a mango leaf stuck into a pin revolves when raced against the wind.

“Bhaiyya, what’s in store for us?” Sophia asked, seeing me lost in thought. “I feel so afraid. Amma never takes me into confidence. She just starts crying when I ask her.”

So she was asking me! I suddenly felt important. Wasn’t I her elder brother? Although I was myself feeling worried I tried to keep a straight face and said in a most reassuring manner, placing my hand upon her shoulder, “Nothing is going to happen. Take it from me, there’s nothing to worry. Such things do happen. How does it matter that it is government money? Abba will make up the loss.”

But when left alone I felt doubly worried. At every sound I felt as if it was the police come with handcuffs. They were dragging away father after tying him with chains.

I lost my appetite totally and could not even swallow a morsel of food. Sophia pressed me to eat and then gave up. I heard Amma sobbing. When I lay down in my cot to sleep she was still sobbing.

I had a dream. It was a high structure fallen in ruins—so high that I could not see its top even when I tilted back my head. The ruin was crumbling down. High up, a mad man who was not visible was dropping bricks from the top of the structure. With the bricks came down huge debris.

Caught by fear, the people living around the structure, screamed. They sneaked under the structure and cursed the invisible man who was throwing bricks at them. But their screaming had no effect on the lunatic. On the contrary, he started throwing the bricks and the debris with renewed vigour and in larger quantities, hurting many people down below.

Then I realised that the ruin which I had seen standing in a big maidan in an unknown place had shifted, right in front of our house and the people who had got injured were none others than the members of my family. (In between everything got muddled and came without any sequence).

I recognised the house. It was Hardeep’s—the girl who was studying with me in school. A huge crowd had collected in the verandah and the front room of the house and people were talking so loudly all at the same time, that nobody was able to

understand what the other was saying. Every one was making suggestions concerning some medicine. Perhaps someone was lying ill in the house. All around one could only see huge pot-bellied Sikhs. Had something happened to Hardeep? What had led me towards her house?

Then I realised that I had come to the wrong place and tried to run away from there. But I feared that the moment I stepped away from the place the ruin would crash upon me. To my surprise, Hardeep's house suddenly changed into Sallo Apa's house and I frantically shouted, "Sallo, Sallo, run! Get out of the way!"

Suddenly a man came hurtling down from the invisible top, bringing down a huge quantity of debris with him and fell face down on the ground. It was actually a boy of fifteen or sixteen, wearing shirt and knickers. Stricken with fear, I walked up and turned the boy's face up—a round and swarthy face, unshaved beard (at his age?) and big and fearsome eyes.

Suddenly the boy's eyelids fluttered and he rolled his eyeballs as if in prophecy. "You will soon be clapped into jail," he seemed to be telling me

I wanted to ask him something about Sallo Apa but then I realised that she was lying ill in the house. It was her house and not Hardeep's. (More segments of the dream, lacking in coherence). There was a bamboo grove, drenched in rain. Mud and slush along the bank of the Madin river. Oh, how blue the flowing water was and how silvery white the fishes frolicking in it! Then I saw Sallo Apa emerging from the river, her body wet through and through and only a gossamer thin piece of cloth clinging to it so that she looked almost naked. I started looking the other way. Then I remembered that she was holding a big fish in her hand but when I turned to look I found that it was not a fish but a snake that she was holding.

"Apa, drop it! It's a snake!" I shouted again and again but Apa did not seem to be hearing me. She just kept smiling at me. (The scene suddenly changes). It is the back side of Apa's house. There is a small pigeon-like hovel into which I enter alone. Sallo Apa is not with me. What am I doing in this cubby-hole all by myself? I feel suffocated. The cubby-hole is very stuffy and damp. As I try to get out the walls move forward and close upon me. I run out like mad. It is the rear verandah of an

unfamiliar house and a bleak and cold kitchen is jutting out from the verandah. The widow who is a tenant of Sallo Apa's outhouse is sitting in the kitchen. It is rather strange that the door through which I had entered has been blocked by a wall, leaving no exit for me. I climb up the wall frantically but before I could jump down to the other side some one casts a heavy net over my body and I get entangled in it up to my neck. I cry for help but my voice dies in my throat.

"Babban! O, Babban!"

A voice coming from far off falls on my ears like a thin spray. Then it resounds in my ears in my state of semi-wakefulness I recognise the voice. It's Amma's. But I can't open my eyes.

"Bhaiyya! Bhaiyya!"

Another voice. As I force open my eyes I find Sophia standing over my cot, her hands resting upon my shoulders. She is trying to shake me into wakefulness.

I lie still for sometime as if paralysed. I can't move my feet nor my arms. They remain where they are as if I am alive only above my neck and my torso has become lifeless and my limbs will not work even if I force them to.

"Bhaiyya, what's the matter?" Sophia asks me in a soft voice as she sits down on the edge of my cot. "Were you having a dream?"

"Yes."

"What dream?"

The whole dream came vividly to my mind but I lacked the guts to describe it to my sister. I only said, "It was a terrible dream."

"In your sleep you must have placed your head on your chest," Sophia said as if she had absorbed in old woman's wisdom. Then I heard Amma telling Sophia to ask me to sleep on my side. "He's always sleeping on his back," she said. "How can one escape dreams if one sleeps on one's back all night."

"Did I dream?" I asked Sophia as strength returned to my limbs.

"Yes, you must have been dreaming."

"You mean I really screamed? Was I muttering also?"

"No, you only screamed," Sophia took a long breath. "Hai

by harping on all that?"

Then he turned to Abba. "Bhaiyya, you must turn a new leaf," he said. "It does not look nice at your age. It's time you thought of your family. Your children are growing fast and the time is not far off when you will have to think of their marriages. How long can you carry on like this?"

Abba said nothing. Perhaps he kept sitting there with lowered head.

"Just ask him how much salary he has brought home in the past two years." Amma said in a strained voice. "If I ask him he jumps on my neck. He wants to shut my mouth with harsh words. If someone tries to intervene, he twins round on him also. Last time when Roshan Bhaiyya made objections, he came to blows with him. Now he regards him as his worst enemy. They are not even on speaking terms and have not met each other for years together. One of them is his sister and the other a brother-in-law."

"If she feels so much for them why doesn't she go and stay with them?" Abba said gnashing his teeth. "As for me, I will not care to even look at his face as long as I live."

I tensed up as I stood there leaning against the wall. I was now getting nearer the cause of estrangement between our two families. But how was I to get at the exact truth? Could Sallo Apa help? Finding that the matter was getting bogged down in irrelevancies, Uncle Trivedi tried to be firm with Abba. "Listen, first let us attend to what is of immediate concern to us," he said. "Have you been able to get hold of some money?" he asked Abba.

"No."

"How much money do you require?"

"Say about four hundred and fifty rupees."

Uncle Trivedi was silent for a while as if he was thinking of some way of procuring the money. "But Bhaiyya, what did you do with all that money?" he asked testily. "It's a lot of money."

"How can he tell?" Amma spoke from behind the curtain. "I'll tell you instead. He threw it away on saris, jewellery, cosmetics and all that crap for that wretch. His salary was not enough to quench her greed."

"Are you listening?" Abba said angrily. "See how this

woman lets loose her tongue."

Things seemed to be drifting towards the point of no return. Uncle Trivedi tactfully pushed Abba out of the room to save the situation. From behind my hiding place I saw Uncle Trivedi talking animatedly with Abba, as he led him away, resting his hand on his shoulder.

Abba was away from home a long time and returned late in the afternoon. He was looking seedy as before—the same dirty and dishevelled clothes, unshaved chin, and the sparse hair standing on his balding head. His eyes were red and he looked worn out and ill.

In the morning he had gone away with Uncle without washing or changing. He did not even take a cup of tea. After they were gone Amma had kept standing at the door, lost in thought. Then she wiped her tears and went in. She got Abba's bath ready and after preparing tea for him kept waiting for his return. We thought that Abba had gone round the corner to have a chat with Uncle Trivedi and would be back soon. But the bath water became tepid, the fire in the hearth died and the tea turned black. Amma kept sitting on the mat, waiting for him and at last fell asleep.

Abba came silently in the afternoon like a thief. He noiselessly closed the door behind him, and sitting down in the chair, closed his eyes, making no one aware of his presence. Sophia discovered him sitting there when she strayed towards the verandah. "Abba has come," she whispered to Amma, shaking her out of sleep.

Amma got up but she did not go to Abba. She sent Sophia in her place. "Abba, have a wash. Tea is waiting for you," Sophia passed on the message to her father and came away.

An hour passed but Abba kept sitting in his chair, his eyes closed as before. Sophia reminded him a couple of times but he only nodded blankly without stirring from his chair. At last I went to him.

It was a hot afternoon. The small part of the landscape that was visible through the door was shimmering like a gilded sheet. There was no shade to be seen as far as the eye went. A mangy horse stood grazing lazily under a bent tree in the distance. The afternoon sighed sleepily.

Abba opened his eyes on hearing my footsteps and stared at me without lifting his head. As his gaze fell upon me I felt as if something had started seething within me like boiling water in a cauldron.

"Abba!" He did not seem to have heard me. He kept staring at me with expressionless eyes as if he was surveying me from head to foot or as if he was seeing me for the first time. Then he gestured to me to come near him. "What's it, son?" he asked, caressing my head.

In all my life, I had never felt such a sense of nearness to Abba. I almost felt overwhelmed. It was only when he was deeply stirred that he addressed me in this manner.

Just then Amma called out for Sophia and getting no response, she herself came out to tell Abba that the bath water which she had heated a second time was again getting cold. How long was she required to keep the firewood burning?

This time Abba got up startled as if he had suddenly realised his mistake. He wordlessly proceeded towards the bathroom.

I felt as if a drop of hot water falling from above had scalded the nape of my neck. I looked at Abba's face while he was stepping across the threshold. In a fleeting moment I saw him rubbing one of his eyes and wiping away a tear.

Like a lid suddenly flying off a tightly closed container my feelings erupted from within me. "Oh God, keep my Abba from crying," I prayed. "I can't bear to see him in trouble."

In the evening many new faces came with Uncle Trivedi. Abba was at home. He had taken his bath and drunk a cup of tea. But he had refused to eat anything. He had not shaved.

Abba was formally introduced to the visitors. They then went into a long huddle of which I could not make out anything. The word 'house' occurred repeatedly in their talk from which I guessed that the discussion centred round our house. It appeared that Uncle Trivedi was trying to force some terms on the visitors. He was doing the bulk of the talking while Abba contented himself with a few observations.

All the time Amma had been listening to their talks from behind the curtain, not allowing me or Sophia to come near her.

After sometime Uncle Trivedi called Sophia and said, "*Beti*, ask your mother to go behind the purdah. We want to inspect the house."

Amma retired into the kitchen along with Sophia while I watched the four of them walking in—Abba in the lead followed by Uncle Trivedi and the two strangers.

"The house looks pretty old," one of the strangers said as he entered the first room and surveyed it from the ceiling down to the floor.

"Nobody is disputing that," Uncle Trivedi said. "It was made by his grandfather. In those days such houses were regarded as something very special, grand and spacious. Its time that sets the style. Please step this way."

They inspected the whole house and then retired to the front room. When I went in with tea they were sitting quiet as if trying to arrive at their own conclusions.

"So what have you decided?" Uncle Trivedi asked after the stranger had finished his tea and taken a few puffs at his *biri*.

"What's there to decide?" the stranger replied. "I've already told you."

Uncle Trivedi and Abba looked at each other.

"Even after you have inspected the house?"

"Yes. But what difference does that make? Look, the number of rooms mean nothing to me. When I've to construct the whole thing over again, the rooms don't have a separate value."

"But the dimensions of a plot of land do matter, don't they?"

"Maybe," the stranger said in an indifferent tone. "But I can't offer more than what I've told you. Its upto you now. You can drop it if my price does not suit you."

I saw Abba's face tingling with rage though he did not give vent to his feelings. He just looked at the visitor and lowered his head, leaving it to Uncle Trivedi to have the final say.

The people were gone after half an hour, leaving the house in hushed silence. Abba was still sitting in the same place. Then what have you decided?"

Abba looked over his shoulder, startled. Amma was standing there leaning against the door.

Many minutes passed but silence still hung between them. Then they heard someone in the neighbouring house beating cloth on the washing slab. Perhaps the man had just finished his bath. Due in the pervading silence the staccato 'phut phut' of the cloth being beaten resounded more loudly. Getting no reply Amma repeated her question.

Abba still made no reply. He sat statue still, looking ahead of him.

"Babban was telling me that he is not prepared to offer a single paisa more than five hundred rupees. Is it true?"

"Yes, so he said." Abba loudly cleared his throat.

"Are you going to sell the house for a song? Dirt cheap as that?"

"What can I do? The other alternative is that you keep the house and I go to jail."

Amma flared up. "It's your doing," she said "I never asked you to have all your fun and land us in trouble."

At this Abba lost his temper. "Get away from here!" he thundered at her. "Get away, I tell you or there will be murder."

For an instant Amma stood there hushed and then she burst out crying. "There was this umbrella over our heads bequeathed by our forefathers," she wailed. "Now that too, is going. Oh, God, are we going to live under the trees?"

“COME with me...” Amma quickly flung the *pallav* of her *dupatta* over her left shoulder and started to go with out waiting for me. She had given me no time to ask where we were going. Even otherwise, I didn't have the courage to ask this question of her. I quietly followed her at her heels.

For Amma to wear a *dupatta* was a clear indication that she was setting out on some special mission. If she went to a neighbour for a chat she invariably took Sophia along. But this time she did not deem it proper to let Sophia accompany her. While leaving, she asked a neighbour to keep an eye on the house. Sophia was alone.

"Where are you going?" The contractor's wife asked her in her characteristic manner, just to probe. The wife of the grain merchant was also sitting by her side and Amma had seen them talking in whispers.

"Not far. I'll be back soon," Amma gave an evasive reply and swiftly passed on. In fact Amma knew these women well and although she pretended to be friendly with them she tried to keep a discreet distance from them.

Only a few days ago the contractor's wife had visited Amma and had tried to find out about Abba. But Amma had rebuffed her. Provoked, the woman had gone straight at Amma. "I've been hearing stories," she said. "You know what the grain merchant's wife told me? That Babban's father had not been sleeping at home for the past few nights. I said that did not make sense to me. Where would a family man go if not sleep at home?"

Amma's face turned red with anger. She looked at the woman with searching eyes and working fast at her arcanut cracker asked in a brittle voice, "How does the grain merchant's wife know? Does Babban's father sleep in her house?"

The contractor's wife was perhaps not prepared for such an attack. She turned pale. "How do I know, Apa?" she said waving her hand in the air. "I just passed it on to you because I do not appreciate her insinuations. But don't tell her. She is the quarrelsome type. She can keep up a feud for seven generations. No one cares to fall foul of an unclothed man. "Not even God."

"Nor do I," Amma replied in the same tone. "I just made a casual observation. But I don't know why people relish maligning others. What do they get out of it? I never poke my nose into other's affairs. I always keep to myself. If I'm good to others God is good to me."

"Yes, Apa," the contractor's wife heartily agreed with Amma. "The fact is that her husband has amassed a lot of money through unfair means and now she does not have a single worry in the world. Only a few years ago her husband was on a job of twenty rupees a month. He has forgotten those difficult days and is now pleased to call himself a *seth* through that ill-gotten money. The other day she was showing me her

necklace. It must have weighed two or three *tolas*. But she said it weighed more than five *tolas* and cost her seven hundred rupees. I said what she said could be a fact but we do not much care for heavy jewellery. Till yesterday her husband used to beat her till her bones cracked and today he lavishes necklaces on her. Believe me, Apa, I spurn such gifts. But what kind of a husband is he that beats her as one beats a bullock?"

Amma felt bored and said that she was not interested.

It had been an unusually hot day. In the evening dark clouds came sailing in the sky but they were soon blown away by a strong wind. Although there were no signs of rain, Amma kept glancing at the sky as she walked alongside me.

It was a long and narrow lane and became dark as the night approached. It took long for the lane to join the main road. For lack of light few people passed through this lane. But even then one had to watch one's step.

"Amma, are we going to Uncle Trivedi's house?" I asked. Walking across the road we had entered another lane. But I did not get a satisfactory reply. She only replied in an evasive 'No' and accelerated her pace.

The roads and lanes along which I had passed hundreds of times in the day now looked strange and unfamiliar in the gathering darkness. We entered a dark *mohalla*. There were many lamp-posts but none of them had an electric bulb. In the dark the entire *mohalla* looked mysterious as if it was part of some other town. The houses leaning across the lane looked like blobs of ink and acquired forlorn look as one came near them. In some houses these were small dimly lit oil lamps and in others not even those.

Some stray goats were sitting on the plinth of a big but seedy looking brick house, and chewing the cud, their lambs frisking around them. There were some signs of activity in the houses adjacent to this big house although they wore an anaemic and morgue-like look.

Amma stopped in front of one of those houses and called out a name. After a while a middle-aged squat-looking woman emerged from the door, holding a small lamp, without a shade. Screening its flame with her other hand she peered at us trying to make out who we were. Then Amma told the woman her name and she felt reassured.

"Come in," she withdrew her cupped hand from over the flickering flame, allowing its light to fall directly over our faces. She had a bland, expressionless face, betraying no curiosity or sign of welcome.

"Who's there?" a husky and aged voice asked from inside.

Amma made no reply. While receding into the house, the middle-aged woman announced Amma's identity by describing her as the wife of so and so.

Had I come alone or with some other person I would have immediately bolted from that place. I had heard of haunted houses where ghosts and witches lived. It looked like one such house.

A witch holding a flickering lamp, I feared, would emerge from one of these houses and lure the unwary visitor in a haunted house, wearing an abandoned look, where there was not a soul to be seen, not even the sound of a child.

She placed the lamp in a small alcove in the smoke-smeared wall and spreading a mat on the floor lowered herself on it, without inviting us to sit down.

"Take me to Rahmat Uncle," Amma said, stopping near the mat. "I'm in a hurry. I've no time to sit."

The door of the adjoining room creaked open and I saw an old man, holding a dim lamp appear in the door. An old man of medium height, decrepit body, close cropped hair and a grey beard. Since the light was falling on him from behind I could not see him clearly nor could Amma, but she salaamed him respectfully.

"What has brought you here, *beti*? Are you well?" he asked. He was so soft-spoken and his voice was so full of warmth, that I felt reassured. A ghost could not have spoken in that vein. I laughed at myself for harbouring such silly thoughts. My courage returned.

"Rahmat Chacha, I wish I could say that I'm well," Amma said in a sad voice. "It's not in my fate to lead a happy life. It is the same story, day in and day out—all the twelve months of the year."

"Please come in." The old man stepped aside, making way for us to enter his room.

Amma removed her sandals and placed them in a corner. Firmly folding the *dupatta* round her body she bent low in

salutation and entered the room.

It was a narrow, suffocating room, filled with the fragrance of incense. I could hear the sound of brass cymbals in the distance which reminded me that the month of moharram was just round the corner. In every home they would ask for God's benediction, make *tazias* and join processions.

I saw that two small toy carts covered with green cloth and decorated with flowers and strips of silver foil had been set against the wall. There were peacock frisks resting on both sides of the carts and in front there was incense burning in a stand. A glass tumbler had been filled with rice to hold joss sticks in position, before which Rahmat Chacha was standing with his hands spread out and his head bowed in prayer. A little apart from him sat Amma, her hands and feet covered with cloth and her eyes reverentially fixed on the carts.

After two minutes or so the old man moved his hand over his face and sitting down on the mat looked at Amma. But she did not turn her face towards him. She was still absorbed in looking at the carts.

Rahmat Chacha drew towards himself the vessel in which Amma had brought rice from home and taking a handful of grain from it, carefully covered the vessel again. Then he collected some ash from under the joss sticks and made it into some small packets. "It's over," he said getting up.

A little startled, Amma took the packets from Rahmat Chacha and gave him a questioning look.

"God willing, all will be well," Rahmat Chacha looked sympathetically at Amma. "Eat one powder yourself and let Babban's Abba eat the other. Force it on him if he refuses. But eat it he must. I've said my prayers over the packets."

Amma heard Rahmat Chacha with bowed head. Perhaps she had not heard his last words. And if she had, it seemed she had not taken them seriously. For sometime she sat there resting her head over her pulled up knees. Then she took a deep breath. "Rahmat Chacha, you had said the same thing last year too," she said.

"Yes, I did. I did certainly," Rahmat Chacha gave a hollow laugh. "And I'm saying the same thing now. I will say the same thing again when you come to me next year. *Beti*, you must have faith—and patience. Allah's eyes are not closed. And

besides, what more can we do except pray?"

It seemed Amma had not been able to find any comfort in Rahmat Chacha's words. For some time she sat there staring at the toy carts resting in front of her till tears rolled down her eyes. "If I did not have faith and patience I would have been dead long ago. And the truth is..."

"Who's there?" Rahmat Chacha suddenly called out. Some sound outside the door had caught his attention and it seemed Amma's words had passed over him unheard. Rahmat Chacha sat alert, his ears perked up, to find what was happening outside. When no more sound came his wife said irritably, "Nobody is there. Your ears must have been buzzing. It's only the neighbour's goats. They had strayed into our verandah."

"I thought somebody had called me," he laughed abashedly. Then he had a sudden bout of coughing and his breathing became laboured.

"It's always like this with him," his wife placed her hand over his shoulder and gently thumped his back. "His condition suddenly deteriorates as Moharram approaches. He thinks every footstep on the road is leading to his house. He keeps shouting, 'who's there? Come in. Come in. I'll pray for you with all my heart.' But it's just an illusion. There's no one there. Sometimes he even walks out to the road, swearing that he was sure someone had called him but that I had driven him away. He really makes a spectacle of himself. Barring the month of Moharram don't we somehow manage to stay alive in other months too? Granted that the offerings from our patrons have diminished considerably. Gone are the days when one could live for the rest of the year on what one earned in the month of Moharram."

Amma looked on, wearing a haggard expression.

A few years ago the biggest *tazia* of the locality used to be made in this house and it was also here that an overwhelming proportion of boons was prayed for by Rahmat Chacha. At that time he was in much better shape and the times were not so hard. From the fifth day of the month of Moharram till the tenth he did not even have time to breathe. People came to him in hordes, and he did not care to ascertain what the women had brought him by way of offerings. He just

put aside the vessel. He was so rushed for time that he could not even raise his hand in prayer for the customary one minute. He would drop it when only half way through. He kept the packets of holy ash ready well in advance and he would distribute them stingily with just the ordained quota of sweets. By the tenth day of the month he would pile up a huge stock of green coconuts and sweets, not to speak of the coins, of course.

But now everything had changed with the times. Without his knowing it, the centre of activity had shifted to a rival's house — *tazia* and invocation for boons and all. People strayed towards Rahmat's house as if in a fit of absent-mindedness. He had indeed fallen on bad days.

"I had told him time and again that it was not easy to play a *pir*'s role." His wife said. "If something goes wrong its the *pir* who comes in for blame. They play hell with him. And that's exactly what has happened now. But he is adamant. He will never learn. That's why now even his sons have spurned him."

"How am I bothered?" Rahmat Chacha laughed manly. "I'm still standing on my two legs, ain't I? And tomorrow if I die my body will not rot by the wayside. The people of the locality will take charge of it."

Ignoring his remarks the old woman turned to Amma. "You can see for yourself, his body has already started going to pieces. It has become useless for work. Once he starts coughing it goes on and on, giving him no respite for hours together. And if he sits down he finds it difficult to rise on his feet. I had warned him again and again but he does not care. He says, 'I've worked all my life and I'm not going to give up just because my end is near.'"

A bugle blew somewhere in the vicinity interrupting the old woman's flow of talk. I realised that Rahmat Chacha's house was located somewhere near the police lines.

Amma looked around startled at the sound of the bugle. "Its eight-thirty, I think," she said.

Time seemed to have no meaning in that house. Eight or ten meant the same to the people. But Amma who had the sense of time got up abruptly and picked up the plate of sweets.

We came out and gained the road guided by the dim light

of a tiny lamp, Rahmat Chacha accompanying us upto the end of the lane where Amma took leave of him by saying salaam in a tremulous voice. "Betí, don't pay heed to what the old woman had said. Old age and poverty have given her such terrible jolts that sometimes her mind gets befuddled. Now she can't bear the slightest suffering and starts yapping."

"No, Rahmat Chacha, don't talk like that."

"These days people have lost faith in *pirs*. It may be the same with you. If you don't have faith in me then the matter ends there. But believe me when I tell you. . ."

He started coughing and placed the lamp on the ground to enable him to cope with the attack. "My whole life, as you can see, now lies behind me," he said. "Its almost nearing its end. I've never sinned knowingly to make me stand before God with blackened face. The profession of a priest may be false but that is for God to say. My life is not based on falsehood and that is why my word still carries weight. My prayer will bear result."

"Rahmat Chacha. . ." Amma's voice choked.

"I know, I know," Rahmat Chacha lifted his hand to quieten Amma. He wanted to say more but he had again started coughing. While coughing his breath blew over the flame, extinguishing the lamp and flinging us into darkness.

The goats sitting on the neighbour's plinth started bleating and somewhere in the darkness a cricket trilled, its voice becoming one with the bleating of the goats.

"Wait, I'll go back and light the lamp." Rahmat Chacha turned back to go but Amma stopped him from the bother.

Plunging into the darkness as we tried to pick our way towards home we felt as if we had emerged from one tunnel and entered another.

The locality of Mominpur was not there before. Not many years ago some weaver families from Uttar Pradesh had drifted to Bastar and settled down in an isolated and uninhabited area of this town. In course of time the number of these Momin families swelled to a few hundred and the locality where they lived came to be known as Mominpur.

In this place which was originally a haunt of stray dogs, cattle and horses a few brick houses and mud dwellings sprang up, each dwelling varying in shape and size according to the

financial condition of its owner. The first thing that greeted a visitor's eyes were strands of coloured yarn in front of each dwelling. The whole day besides the shrill cries of children and women one could hear the staccato *khut khut* of the weavers pegging away at their shuttles while countless stretches of yarn snapped and were mended. In each lane one could see one or two hovel-like sheds of tin constructed on common land in which families of a tribe akin to those of gram parchers lived. Nobody knew where they originally came from and whether they had any specific calling. In the name of possession, they had a few strings and rags, one lantern, a couple of aluminium utensils gone black with continuous use and an equally black earthen pot. Each family—father, mother, sons, daughters and other relatives—lived huddled together and died in the same shed. Originally these families were quite substantial in number but they gradually dwindled till now only a handful of them remained. An entirely new habitation had sprung up in the place.

Once a year Mominpur springs into the limelight, people from the surrounding areas flocking here in large numbers. Overnight rows of stalls spring up, selling cigarettes, betel leaves, balloons, toys and nick-nacks. There are also wayside teashops, devoid of furniture, frequented by manual workers and peasants. They do brisk business throughout the night.

It was the fifth day of the month and we were eagerly waiting at Mominpur for the *duldul* to come out. Although more than half the night was gone, people, young and old, women and children were yet thronging the place. The porch before every house was crowded with women who had come from the adjoining localities. Even the balconies were bulging with people. There was not a single upper window through whose bars faces were not peeping out. To the left of the road was a small maidan flanked by houses and a big mango tree in its middle. The maidan was brightly lit with electric lamps interspersed with patromax lamps. Mominpur boasted of many public spirited people who were prepared to render free service without any expectation of public acclaim.

Mohsin who was silently watching the crowd turned to me. "Care to smoke?" he asked me.

I looked at him with an expression full of fear and surprise.

True, I had never smoked a cigarette before and it was equally true that on a festive occasion such as this, one felt tempted to have a fag just out of a spirit of adventure, if nothing else. But what really surprised me was that Mohsin had sensed my mood.

"Not just now," I said. "Amma has come with me."

"Where's she?"

I pointed towards the mango tree. "She must be sitting somewhere among the women," I said.

"But I don't see her anywhere," Mohsin's eyes roved all over the place. "Come, we'll go and smoke in that corner."

"No, *Bhaiyya*," I said in a pleading voice. "She has asked me to stay here. She said she would call me in a short while. If I move from here and she . . ."

"All right, you stick here," Mohsin brusquely cut me short. He flung his arm around his companion's shoulder. "Let's go," And they walked away jauntily, arm in arm.

Mohsin's companion was older than him by five years or so. But despite this difference in age they seemed to be very chummy. Sometimes they talked in gestures whose meaning was completely lost on me. If I asked Mohsin, he just shrugged his shoulders and flung a careless, "It's nothing", at me.

Mohsin was older than me by three years or so but his friends were even older. It was rather strange that he had started befriending boys much older than him in age and spent most of his time in their company. On many occasions I had gone out with him on his jaunts. I could not understand their ways nor their special lingo. I felt I was too young to understand these things.

Suddenly there was some commotion in the lane from which the *duldul* was to appear. Then I heard many voices speaking over the mike, all at the same time, followed by a low murmur of elegies being recited in the distance and a flood of light slowly advancing in our direction.

On both sides of the lane there were about twenty women carrying petromax lamps on their heads proceeding in our direction, the crowd slowly walking between the two lines formed by these women. The crowd was headed by three people reciting an elegy, one of them holding a mike and the other a book held low for others to be able to read from it. They were

followed by about thirty mourners who advanced together in a semi-circle. In the rear came a rickshaw carrying an amplifier and a unit of batteries. Last of all came the *duldul*.

About thirteen hundred years ago a great tragedy had taken place in the history of mankind. In a place named Karbala in the Arabian desert, Hussain, along with a number of his followers had sacrificed himself along with his family in the name of truth. In a battle, before his very eyes, his brothers, nephews, sons, sympathisers and friends and even new-born babes, famished and thirsty were butchered. He was the last to be martyred.

That day the Euphrates turned red with the blood of the innocents. The most pathetic thing was that they did not give a drop of water to the thirsty children. The followers of Hussain had gone without water for days. Now the water was within their sight but they could not have access to it. The enemy had mounted guard over the river to keep the thirsty away.

When even the innocent children and men were denied water one can imagine the plight of horses and camels. But even under such trying conditions Hussain's horse 'Jul-Jinnah' stood by his master till the very end. Though riddled with arrows and sword thrusts he did not give up life. He was led to the river but he refused to drink. When Hussain fell down from his back and his head was cut off and his body trampled over, although grievously injured and bleeding profusely the horse made for the fields where Hussain's family was waiting for him.

He was a unique horse. That is why he is still remembered although hundreds of years have gone by. The *duldul* symbolises this episode.

There was a flurry of activity as the procession reached the head of the lane. The youths sitting on the restaurant benches, gossiping and drinking cheap tea, rushed out of the restaurants. The women sitting on the house plinths woke up their children and quickly rose to their feet. From behind the doors many sari ends flapped in the air. The faces behind the windows became distinct and many elbows came to rest against the walls.

To relieve the misery of man Hussain cast himself
like pain over the lives of the people.

The world was lost in sleep. He woke up the world.

The procession wended its way through the lane, to the singing of the elegy, the lights moving with it, and countless feet stamped the ground as they slowly trod forward.

Behind the elegy singers came a band of mourners in a circle. They advanced beating their breasts, their bodies covered with black shirts, their eyes filled with tears and the words 'Hai Hussain' falling from their lips. The procession would stop after walking a few paces, the elegy singers would sing a doleful line while the mourners would beat their breasts with great vehemence till the elegy rose to its crescendo.

"*Bhaiyya*, you're wanted."

I looked up startled. It was a small child standing by my side.

"Who wants me?"

"She." He ran away after pointing in the direction of the mango tree. My mouth fell open as I approached the mango tree. It was Sallo Apa clad in a silk *burqua*, its veil thrown back over her head.

"Babban, haven't you recognised me?" Sallo smiled. There was another girl standing by her side. "Is it because of my *burqua*? It's not mine. It's her's. I'm wearing it just for fun. How long have you been standing here?"

"For a long time. When did you come?"

"Just a short while ago. I saw you standing there and sent for you. Have you come alone?"

"No, Amma is with me. And you?"

"I've come with Zaibun." Apa pointed towards the girl standing by her side. "My cousin?" she introduced me to the girl. "From mother's side."

From her appearance and mode of dress Zaibun looked a girl of the Bohra community. Dark complexion, sharp features, average height, shy by nature, she was wearing a rust coloured loose silk *lehnga* and an *orhni* over her blouse.

I didn't know how to conduct myself in the presence of the girl. As was of my age I felt shy in wishing her first and it would have been rude of me just to keep staring at her. But she herself solved my problem. "There's my Amma coming!" She briskly walked away in the opposite direction.

"She's really scared," Sallo laughed as she watched the girl merging into the crowd.

"Scared of whom?"

"Of her mother. These people observe very strict purdah."

By now the procession had reached the crossing and the mourning was at its height. A huge crowd had gathered round the mourners who were beating their breasts, their legs thrown apart like pairs of scissors and their eyes lifted towards heaven. Their hands fell heavily on their chests and rose up to fall again. People sprinkled rose water upon the mourners and the procession marched forward.

Suddenly the mike got stuck, repeating the same line again and again like a wild refrain. Then it fell silent and there was only the sound of hands beating breasts.

"Babban, so you failed to recognise me in this *burqua*? Don't I look nice in it?"

I looked intently at Apa. Girls generally look more attractive in bright light. She couldn't be called fair. But it was her eyes. Although she had not touched up her face and given herself mystery or glamour, her simplicity made up for. She looked really charming in her black veil.

"Of course, the veil does look nice on you. If I were you I wouldn't wear any other costumes. Your friend Zaibun should be looking for you."

"Oh, she!" Apa paused for an instant and an imperceptible smile played across her lips. "Yes, she'll be looking for me," she said. "But she won't get lost, you can be sure of that. Didn't you see? She ran away for fear of her mother."

"Why, hadn't she told her before coming?"

"She must have, for sure. Girls of this place can't take liberties like that. And that too at night. Her mother would cut her to pieces."

"But why was she trying to hide?"

"Arre," Apa started laughing. "You are so simple. No doubt, you were standing by my side but to Zaibun you are no better than a stranger. If her mother had seen her with you heavens above would have fallen."

Apa had said all that in one breath but I felt scandalised. Surely, she was trying to hide something from me. But I had no way of drawing her out.

Young men passed by in groups, staring at us. Sometimes Apa would take notice of someone in the group but mostly she

ignored the passers by. "The wretches, how they stare at us?" was her constant refrain.

I noticed that though Apa was wearing a *burqua* she had throughout kept her face uncovered.

In the rush I had overlooked a young man wearing chocolate coloured trousers who had kept following us at some distance, his eyes fixed on us all the time. In the beginning I had not caught Apa's eyes but then I had noticed her throwing furtive glances at the young man. Once she even enquired from him about Mohsin which I thought was inexplicable.

Our way was constantly being blocked by the crowd, forcing us to cover the distance fitfully. I took the opportunity of looking around more scrutinisingly. Yes, the young man was still there, standing at some distance from us, a cigarette dangling between his lips. Apparently watching the procession, he did not forget to cast sidelong glances in our direction.

The procession drew nearer and my eyes were fixed on the *duldul*. A big, beautifully caprisoned thoroughbred, there were silver anklets round its legs, a frilled silver canopy over its head and artificial arrows and lances sticking in its body, giving the impression that it was returning from the battlefield after being seriously wounded.

"Do you know this horse will not be living when the next Moharrum comes?" Apa said.

"How do you know?" I asked.

"That's what all of them say. Once a horse is used for *duldul* its end is not far. It gets feeble and is reduced to bones."

Although I did not believe her I desisted from making any comment. I looked at the hapless horse which according to Apa was doomed to early death. They also harnessed a horse to a *tonga*. But what a difference between the two! One horse was a beast of burden and was constantly whipped, whereas this other was richly draped and honoured by men. The same animal, the same body. It was the occasion that made all the difference.

As the procession receded, the elegy singers raised their voices, the crowd taking up the refrain in unison :

At every breath, at every step,
Breath by breath, step by step,

The bud is dying a lingering death,
There is commotion everywhere,
Life is ebbing away fast,
The earth mourns, the sky mourns,
Whose head has been struck down—they ask.
What heinousness what crime!

I had never witnessed such mourning before. They had taken off their shirts and were walking bare-backed, holding yard-long chains with small knives fixed on them four fingers apart. They struck the chains against their chests till blood ran down from their bodies like perspiration.

As the mourning stopped people from the crowd proclaimed in broken, lacerated voices, "Hussain!" while some youths rushed up and sprinkled rose water on the mourners' blood-smeared bodies. The mourners resumed their passage with faltering motions.

Doesn't this breast beating hurt? Apparently a foolish question but it had some meaning for me. I however dared not put my thought in words for fear of being called a moron.

The band of active mourners was slowing down but the onlookers, it seemed, were still under a spell as if the body of Hussain was lying dead before their eyes. A portly man who looked affluent and educated and who was beating his breast rhythmically as if marking time and crying like a child suddenly wailed, "Hui, Hussain, if only I had been there with you!"

That suddenly reminded me of Mohsin. He would have certainly quipped, "What cheek! As if your presence there would have made any difference!"

In the phalanx on the right, the mourning was at its loudest. A man in black among the mourners suddenly lowered his head and asked his neighbour in a husky voice, "Ramzan, can you spare me a *biri*?"

At the three-point crossing the procession divided in two. The mourners followed by the crowd proceeded towards the mosque while the *duldul* took the direction of the residential quarters. A man holding the horse's reins stopped before each house that had paid for the service of a boon. As the horse stopped, women swarmed round it carrying fine flour, *kheer* and

zarda in plates. They washed the horse's legs, placed the plates at its feet, touched its body reverentially and stepped back. I saw Amma among the boon seekers. She was watching the scene sad-eyed, her elbows resting on her pulled up knees and a plate resting in front.

"Stop, *bhai*, there's one more boon seeker left," many female voices cried in unison from among the gathering. The man holding the rein of the horse had turned away the animal's head. "I can't oblige stragglers singly," the man muttered. "I've still so many houses to visit. My horse can not go back. Better come forward and be done with it." The unfortunate straggler was none other than my Amma.

On the ninth day of the month Mohsin unexpectedly called at our house, this being his first visit to our house. I was in a fix. Should I call him in? I knew Amma's nature. How would she take to my suggestion? Still undecided, I came out of the house.

"Are you coming?" he asked as he stood outside our door.

"Where to?"

"To see the procession. Are you coming?"

I was forbidden to go out of the house at night. But I had a ready excuse. Amma had asked me to carry a message for Rahmat Chacha.

"Wait, I'm coming," I told Mohsin and rushed back into the house, thus getting over the predicament of calling Mohsin in. I changed my clothes and joined him in the lane.

"Last evening I called at your house," I said, sensing that he was in a good mood. "But you were not at home."

"You mean my house?"

"Yes. Apa said that you had gone out with some friends. Do you know what Aunt said about you?"

"Yes, I know," Mohsin said in a careless voice. "She must have complained that I loaf around with vagabonds."

His answer set me thinking. What made him hobnob with vagabonds? I knew he disappeared for a couple of hours every evening. What was it that he was trying to hide from me?

"Mohsin, who is this Naidu?" I suddenly asked him.

Mohsin gave me a startled look. "Why, where did you hear this name?"

"How are you concerned who told me about him? But

first tell me where you go with those big boys? Don't tell me a lie. I am sure, you are hiding something from me."

Mohsin peeped into the dark and laughed. "Don't get upset," he said. "I'm not doing anything reprehensible."

We had reached the crossing. It had been drizzling the whole day and had let up only towards the evening though the sky was still overcast. Due to the dampness there was a nip in the air. I feared that if it again started raining the evening would be ruined. I silently joined my hands in prayer. Or was I doing it to drive away the cold? Mohsin who had seen me holding my hands at my back, laughed. "You just wait," he said. "You will know when the real winter sets in. The nights can be awfully chilly."

Perhaps Mohsin had noticed that I was only wearing a shirt and pajama even no sweater. Whereas he was fully protected against the cold—sweater, woollen jacket, pants and a muffler round his neck.

Not to talk of a woollen coat for myself I had not even seen Abba wearing one. He passed the entire winter and the rains in a pull over. There was only one quilt in the house. Amma resolutely made plans before every winter that even if she had to scrape and scrounge she must have two quilts in the coming winter. If some visitor unexpectedly turned up at night it became quite a job for us to hide those rags in a hurry. What status could a man boast of if he did not even have a proper bedding?

Of course, I could not tell all this to Mohsin.

"I've told you I don't go out at night," I said trying to hide my discomfiture.

I could hear the sound of cymbals coming from an *imambara*. I heard a similar sound in the distance but it was muffled and indistinct.

"It will be a long time before the procession starts," Mohsin said. "The *tazia* of Dharampura Mohalla is the last to start. And it is the most popular one. People wait for it for hours in advance. Some even have forty winks while waiting. Babban, I'm sure you have not seen such enthusiastic crowds anywhere else. And what a crush! It is no place for the old and the weak. They would get pushed around and trampled over in no time. If a child gets caught in the stampede there

would even be no trace left of even his bones.

"What's so special about that place?"

"There's nothing special about it. It's just a question of faith. Yes, one thing that draws people to that place is that a Hindu boy of twelve or thirteen is selected to lend a hand in lifting the first *savari*."

"A similar *sa-ari* is launched from Lal Bagh," Mohsin continued. "It's named the blood-smeared *savari*. It is said that when the *savari* gets into a trance he starts vomiting blood and even the people who try to minister to the *savari* are covered with blood. I have not seen it though. I have only heard our elders saying so and what the elders say is generally true."

I was startled by the sound of cymbals. Soon I saw a flaming torch heading towards us from the road on our right. It was dark and the distance long so we could not see anything else except the torch. Mohsin said, "It appears that the *savaris* are being launched. Let's go to Dharampura."

"But we won't be able to return soon," I objected.

"Yes, not before two or three," Mohsin nodded.

"Then I can't go," I said. "Besides, Amma has entrusted me with an important job."

"What important job?" Mohsin asked.

"Have you seen the Carpenters' Mohalla? I've to call on Rahmat Chacha. He lives in that *mohalla*. He also takes out a *savari* every year, I hear."

"I know, I know," Mohsin said. "You mean that eccentric old man? A clever bloke. Sala!"

Mohsin stopped midway. I had no mind to tell him about the purpose of my visit although he persisted in wanting to know about it. He was in the habit of making fun of everything.

"You go to Dharampura," I said. "I must meet Rahmat Chacha."

Mohsin fell silent as if he was having second thoughts over the matter.

The torch which I had seen proceeding in our direction suddenly disappeared in some lane. In the distance I could hear the sound of drums and cymbals which was joined by the barking of street dogs who generally frequent the mouths of the lanes.

"I'll come with you," Mohsin said at last. "Its too early for me to go to Dharampura."

I did not remember having come to this side of the town before all by myself. I had been here with Amma only the other day and now I was coming here a second time with Mohsin. I had decided that I would visit the place in daytime and have a good look at Rahmat Chacha's house. Was the house really haunted and what was Rahmat Chacha's real vocation? Was he really estranged from his sons? How did he feel at being neglected in old age? That suddenly led my thoughts to my own Abba. My Abba must be in his forties. But what would he look like ten years hence? Ten years is not a long time; it passes so quickly. For all I knew, his body would also become feeble and decrepit like Rahmat Chacha's. The flesh on his cheeks would get wrinkled and hang loosely from his face.

I quickly pushed the thoughts out of my mind. It was going on to be ten when we came near Rahmat Chacha's house. Although it was the ninth of the month, to my utter surprise the lane was silent and dark.

Passing along a slushy stretch full of puddles and potholes we came to the gate of a big barn near which many torches were burning. But there was no music being played nor could I see any congregation around.

As we walked in I saw a few people sitting still as if they were waiting for something to happen. There were three torches burning near them and the fragrance of incense filled the air.

We looked like unwelcome visitors for the people sitting there greeted us with frowns. Some even laughed. I felt uncomfortable. "Is Rahmat Chacha in?" I asked hesitatingly.

Nobody answered. They just looked at each other and then fell to talking in whispers. Soon I saw Rahmat Chacha coming, leaning against the wall for support as he walked dragging his feet. "Who's there Bhaiyya?" he asked while still some distance from us.

I felt embarrassed about disclosing my identity, considering the gaping distance that lay between us. I just said, "It's I."

Rahmat Chacha shaded his eyes with his hands to have a better look but failed to make out who I was.

"You remember I came to you on the fifth day of the month along with my mother," I tried to goad his memory. He waited for a moment and then climbing down the steps, scrutinised my face and naming my father asked me if I was his son. I nodded and he advanced one more step. "Your mother—hasn't she come?"

"No, she has sent me instead. She is not well. She said..."

"It's all right, it's all right," he cut me short as if he already knew what it was all about and that there was no need for me to explain. He turned to go and then stopped abruptly as if he was straining his memory to recall something. "Yes, tell her that all is well."

The atmosphere of the place was so oppressive that I did not want to stay there a moment longer than necessary. Mohsin also seemed to be in a desperate hurry to go. "You came all the way just to say that?" he asked me in a whisper.

"Yes," I said defiantly.

"Will he be coming to your house?"

"I don't know."

"Come, I'll also go back with you. It's too late for me to go to Dharampura. Besides, there's nothing much to see there. It's the same thing year after year."

Returning home I went straight to bed. The night had far advanced when my sleep was disturbed by the sound of music in our courtyard. Sophia was not in her bed and I heard people talking in our verandah.

There were eight or ten aged people sitting in the verandah. Then hearing the sound of music a few women from the neighbouring houses accompanied by their children dropped in and watched the goings on from a corner of the verandah. Amma was very busy. Now she came with a *lota* of sherbet and now with a shallow enamelled basin and then holding a bundle of incense sticks.

His one arm thrown around a helper's neck and holding a peacock feather whisk in the other hand the priest who was charged with conducting the worship was slowly swaying his head as he sat there with closed eyes. Behind him stood a small boy holding a lance and by his side stood Rahmat Chacha holding an incense burner. The people had surrounded the *savari* from all sides.

Placing the enamelled basin before the pir, Amma washed his feet and then holding the glass of sherbet against his lips, dropped some benzoin powder in the incense burner. This done, she stepped back and reverentially stood a little apart from him. The glass of sherbet, after the pir had tasted a drop from it, went round to the congregation, each individual passing it on to the next after taking a sip from it.

There was quiet for some time, every member of the congregation gravely staring into space while the *savari*, his head raised high breathed heavily and Amma bending a little stood in prayerful expectation before him. To my surprise I saw water dripping from her hair. Her sari was also wet as if she had just now come out of the bathroom.

"*Arre*, bring the torch this way," the man who was holding the *savari's* cunimerband cried. Others joined him in underlining his command for the torch. The torch bearer came forward with alacrity and planted himself in front of the *savari*.

Handing the incense burner to the man standing next to him, Rahmat Chacha took out a dog-eared note book from his pocket and started reciting an elegy in a laboured cracked voice :

Zenab wailed over his dead body,
To whose care have you left me?
I have no mentor who would care for me.
To whose care have you left me?
Your sacred body is drenched in blood,
Your head lies sundered from your body,
In which direction are you looking?
Where are you bound for?
To whose care have you left me?

Rahmat Chacha could recite an elegy to great effect. His thick and raucous voice was charged with emotion driving the audience to ecstasy. His voice dripping with pathos stirred me deeply and I sat there as if rooted to the ground. He was still reciting when the peacock feather whisk which was held over the *savari's* head rose in the air and fell over Amma, whisking off her covering from her head. Her wet hair flew in the air

and then masked her face. The whisk struck her head three times and then someone exclaimed from behind, "Proclaim the mourning!"

In response, many voices cried in unison, "Doola! Doola!" The cymbals crashed. The *savari* had receded into the distance.

The courtyard emptied, the sound of music ceased and the lighted head of the torch merged into the darkness. As I moved out I saw that the lane had once more lapsed into silence. Amma was also standing motionless in front of the enamelled basin.

Strangely enough, that night too Abba was not at home.

The maidan of Karbala had put on the look of a busy country fair.

The sandy banks of the Indravati, the wide flat terrain and the surrounding mango groves of Amrai—nobody ever ventured here except during the floods.

Throughout the day the Amrai lies yawning. The dusty bridge over the ghat suffers in lonely silence the heavy tread of passing feet till late in the night while buses trucks and cars noisily race past it, shattering the silence of the surrounding wilderness. The broken railings of the bridge rattle in the strong wind and the long tailed bird perched on the telephone wire tautly stretched across the bridge rises in the air and again settles down on the wire. The river flowing under the bridge murmurs as it strikes against its pillars, its sound reaching upto the cremation ground across the river or falls into the ears of the octroi clerk posted at the head of the bridge.

In the evening the western sky changes many colours. The roseate clouds look at their reflection in the Indravati's mirror and gloat. In place of the long-tailed bird small parrots are perched on the telephone wire. In the distance the fishermen's boats are silhouetted against the sky. Bats rise in the sky in a thick mass like a sheet of cloth from a cluster of trees and momentarily blot out the sky.

Driven into poverty, a man had put up a tea shop in a tumble-down bamboo hut next to the octroi post. Following his example many more shops had sprung up in no time near his own shop. To take advantage of the fair many tents had been pitched in the open maidan and many mat and bamboo enclosures

constructed. One could see a serried line of petromax lamps and itinerant hawkers hawking their wares in baskets thronging the place.

A few years ago one eagerly waited for this day. The preparations would get under way on the ninth of the month in anticipation of the big day. The revellers would come in groups, the girls forming their own separate groups. The young schoolboys, not to be out done, would start preparing for the event many days in advance. There was so much to be done, their main concern being to evade the responsibility of running a free kitchen at the behest of the elders. And they had also to wangle free rides to the fair site.

In the past when we owned land servants used to come from our village to take us to the fair in our bullock carts. Except for Abba we travelled to 'Karbala' in our own transport. But when our lands were gone it also meant an end to our annual visit to 'Karbala'. Although Sophia and I pestered Amma to allow us to visit the fair she never agreed. She never went herself and denied Sophia also her share of fun. And then a time came when this fair lost all importance for us.

Although that day Sallo Apa had sent word to me early in the morning, I could go to her house only in the afternoon. She was combing her hair in readiness to go.

"Babban, so it's morning according to you!" she laughed.

"I'm sorry for being late," I said hiding my embarrassment. "Some friend waylaid me while I was coming to your house," I lied. "Then some old men collared me to assign me *langar* (kitchen) duty. Its an act of piety they said."

"Arre," Apa stopped combing her hair. "So you've friends too!" she jested.

"Why can't I have friends?" I felt piqued at her remark. Did she regard me irresponsible like Mohsin?

"I don't mean that," Apa looked at her reflection in the mirror. "I concede that you too can have friends. I only thought that you were too shy to make friends. So those old men had cornered you? Do they expect you to stir the pot of *pillav* with that big wooden spoon?"

"No, I have not yet reached that stage. But I can easily manage it if it comes to that. There's nothing wrong in handling a wooden spoon."

"There's nothing wrong in that. I was only wondering if you could handle that big wooden stirrer." Sallo Apa threw her combed hair over her back and putting aside the comb collected her hair together and tied them in a loose knot. She laughed.

I looked at her a bit intrigued. She never missed an opportunity to tease me. Did she think I was so delicate as to be incapable of any physical exertion? That a girl should make fun of me—I just couldn't stand it. The taste of my mouth became bitter.

"Apa, I find you are also not above making fun of me," I said.

Apa suddenly relented. "What makes you say that I'm making fun of you?" she said in a placatory tone. I averted my face in anger.

"Don't be silly," she said seeing tears in my eyes. "I didn't mean it at all. Please forgive me."

I was too overwhelmed to be able to speak. I coughed to clear my throat and turned to go.

"Where are you going?" Apa caught my hand.

"What have you called me for?" I asked looking very sullen.

"What's the use? I'll tell you when you're in a mood to listen. In fact I wanted you to accompany me to Karbala. But you are being so touchy. Did you have a tiff with someone?"

I felt I was the biggest fool on earth, so subject to chance and circumstance. I broke into a smile at the slightest happiness and burst into tears at the slightest provocation. It was really funny that if someone said a nice word to me my anger against him immediately evaporated.

"Don't mind it. It's a bad habit with me," I said making a mental somersault. "I'm game if you intend going to Karbala. But how will you go? And who else is going with you?" . . .

Suddenly a car stopped, making a hissing sound, its headlights still on. Many girls wearing *gararas* and *kurtas* spilled out of it, followed by a *burqua* clad woman and an imposing looking man, apparently a government official.

The people standing around cast inquisitive glances at them and exchanged remarks among themselves. The driver drove the car and parked it in a corner where two or three trucks and jeeps were already standing.

We saw a long line of pedestrians and bullock carts ahead of us, going towards the fair site. With every minute that passed the crowd became thicker. People were carrying mats, *durries* and chess-boards with them. They would select some clean and suitable place and would settle down in groups. There were already hordes of them occupying places in the mango groves and along the roadside, sitting around in small groups, their tiffin carriers lying open among them from which they took out food and ate from plates. There were others who sat in circles smoking and chatting and indulging in light-hearted banter.

The tea stalls were no less crowded. People had also collected around *savaris* and *tazias*. The trucks on which they had mounted 'langars' for free distribution of food were the most crowded of all. No distinction was made between king and beggar; each was given generous helpings of food. They all extended their hands and cried for attention—"Serve me first, please! Oh Bhaiyya; Bhai Saheb! O, Topewale Janab! I've shouted myself hoarse and yet you're paying no heed to me,"

"Where's Zaibun? Zaibun, Zaibun, where are you?" It was Sallo Apa shouting. She was standing under a mango tree along with four other girls.

The girl in the blue *kurts* said, "She was here only a moment ago." And then she remembered. "Oh yes, she has gone to fetch water."

Sallo Apa looked around and said in an anxious voice, "You shouldn't have allowed her to go alone."

"Nothing is going to happen to her," a lean and thin, hollow-cheeked girl said, "I too venture out alone. Tell me, who went to the restaurant to lay *pakorries*? I, of course."

"*Arre*, your case is different," one of the girls said. "If Zaibun goes alone ten pair of eyes chase her. Who can say with what intentions? *Hai Allah*, I tremble at the very thought of going out alone."

The thin girl burned with rage at the implied insinuation. She did not deny that Zaibun was good looking and people would stare at her if she went out with unveiled face. But what about this other girl who had the brazenness to compare herself with Zaibun although she was anything but beautiful?

There were buffalo-thick lumps of flesh hanging from her body.

"It's not a question of looks," the thin girl retorted indignantly. "It's a question of honour."

"Babban Bhaiyya, will you please go and look for Zaibun? Be a good boy," Sallo said as I approached her. "These girls have sent her out alone. I'm feeling terribly worried. Just look around. She must be somewhere around."

I cast a questioning look at Sallo Apa.

"She must be hovering around some teashop," Sallo said trying to be helpful. "Or maybe she has gone down to the ghat."

I quietly walked away without saying 'yes' or 'no'. She had insisted on my coming with her to the fair and I had stuck my neck out. Why didn't I have the guts to refuse her? It was a mistake from the very beginning. She had hauled me up into the truck at the last moment and I was the only fool of a mode in the midst of those *bu qua-clad* girls.

"Step aside! Give way!" Some voices shouted in unison behind me. I quickly stepped aside and saw a *savari* surrounded by six torch-bearers and a sizeable crowd proceeding towards a *tazia*, stationed near the bridge. Soon the sound of the music was lost in the din of the crowd.

Had these people really come to mourn, I wondered. Perhaps they had come here only to have a good time. Oblivious of the Karbala and what it stood for, they sat in groups enjoying the glitter and the rustic pleasures of the country fair.

After half an hour as I returned with the news that I had failed to locate Zaibun I found to my great relief that she had already rejoined her group. But Sallo Apa was still wearing a worried look. There was a group of youngmen hanging around the girls. Apa took me aside and whispered in my ear, "Did you see him? I mean, Mohsin. He's also somewhere here."

"Where?"

"Right here, in Karbala. I'm terribly upset. If you find him hanging around tell him that we have also come to the fair."

"But where did you see him, Apa? And with whom?"

"How should I know? I don't recognise all those fellows. You know the type of people he hob-nobs with. Thank God they were busy distributing some leaflets and did not see me."

"What kind of leaflets?" I was already feeling tired and sat down under the tree.

Suddenly I thought of Rahmat Chacha. He must have stayed away from this maddening crowd.

The *tazias* had been lined up and standing near them the elegy singers were reciting lines in soulful voices. The elegy had conjured up such vivid pictures of the grim tragedy that my hair stood on end. Tears came to my eyes.

Centuries have passed. Moharram came every year and is observed in the same way with slight variations. The elegies are transmitted from generation to generation as an oral tradition. This mourning has been going on for centuries and every year there must be many faint-hearted boys like me all a-tremble as they listen to these elegies.

Before the *tazias* were laid to rest I broke away from the crowd and silently recited the last *futeha* and moved my hand over my face.

Most of the people had made a bee line for the place where the *tazias* had been assembled. Sallo and her companions had moved to under a tree without my being aware of it. The mats and the *durries* had been collected and folded up. One only saw banana skins, monkeynut husks strewn over the ground spattered with *paan* juice that had since dried up. The 'langar' was over and the big pots which only a short while ago were full of food were now rattling emptily. The place that all day had resounded with gaiety now lay under a pall of gloom.

The sister moaned the death of her brother.

He is shroudless, shroudless, shroudless.

After the last *fate'ha*, *shaeren*, the traditional sweet was distributed. And also dried dates and almonds.

Two people came forward and lifted a *tazia* to the cries of "Ya Hussain!" coming from hundreds of throats.

The festival of Moharram had come to an end. As the *tazias* proceeded towards the ghat all discipline broke and the crowd scattered in confusion, men and women becoming one in the melee. What I feared came to pass. From where I stood I could clearly see Sallo Apa and her companions. I also spied the youngman in chocolate trousers standing at some distance from me. I watched his every move. But like a pebble cast in a pool,

disorder took over and both Apa and the young man disappeared from my sight.

For an instant I saw Sallo Apa and her friend Zaibun in the surging crowd, the youngman in chocolate pants slowly walking behind them. Then the whole scene shook into a hazy vagueness. This time Zaibun and Apa's other companions were there but Apa herself was missing.

It was like coming for a wild picnic on the banks of the Indravati river.

IN those days life in Bastar was no different from life on an island.

An island is surrounded by a mass of water. It is the boatmen in their boats that join an island with the mainland, often facing daunting storms. As they set feet on the land their lives undergo a sudden change. Men hitherto cooped up in their rooms to fling open their doors and rush out to the sea-washed beaches from where their curious eyes watch the white sails on the vast expanse of the blue waters and above it the sea gulls flying in two tiered or three tiered formations.

Our condition was no different from theirs. Surrounded by the dense *saal* forests and inaccessible hill ranges with hundreds of streams in spate in their deep valleys, the town of Jagdalpur lay like a speck of rice in the vast area of Bastar inhabited by lakhs of tribals. Even in the times of the British rulers as in the days of the native rulers before them, it was nothing more than an island. Rulers came and went but Bastar remained changeless. The outer world was not less than a hundred and fifty miles away from Jagdalpur. For a long time this distance was covered on bullock cart and later on after much remonstrance a niggardly bus service was introduced on this route. Starting at seven in the morning the bus never reached the outer world before ten at night.

How the spark of the countrywide freedom movement fell here I have no knowledge of specially now when everything is lost in the limbo of the past.

From the events of the past which now lie under a thick pall of forgetfulness one name still emerges—the name of P.S. Naidu with whose person the word *khadi* was closely associated, something unknown to me at that time. And again, for the first time I realised that there was another life beyond one's personal life, a life of dedication, lived beyond the self for which a man is ever prepared to make the supreme sacrifice.

It was summer time. The days were humid and hot but the evenings were buoyant and cool. They had not cut down the jungles around Bastar and there were no macadamized roads. There were no factories either, belching out smoke, nor cars and trucks chasing one another on the roads. The sky remained clear and unpolluted. Near the Gol Bazaar milk white cranes leaned out in rname from the branches of the tamarind trees while white flecks of clouds sailed over them. The smell of *saal* leaves rising from the Gangamundi jungles in the south would mix with the water-laden breeze constantly blowing from the Indravati river towards the town which lay in torpor like an indolent man dozing complacently, free of all care.

How did I spend my evenings? On returning from school I would throw my books in a corner and pick up some silly novel to read, praying all the time that Amma should not ask me to run some errand for her. She rarely bought provisions in one lot to last the whole month. Instead she made all her

purchases on a daily basis, depending upon the amount of money she had in hand at the moment and my services were inevitably requisitioned at odd hours whenever she discovered that she had run short of some item of ration, making me run to the bazaar for it. One day when a friend of mine importunated with Amma that I must have some time for games in the evening she thought it expedient to turn a deaf ear to his suggestion. She said that I was not interested in games and besides I had no time for them because I wasted all my time in reading trashy books.

The first was expediency and the second a clear accusation. But I did not have the courage to join issue with Amma though I realised that one reason for my looking so sickly could be lack of physical activity and my habit of being a poor mixer. Or was it that I had become a stay-at-home just to avoid physical activity. Mohsin had once taunted me: "How will you carry on in life with your mosquito-like gaunt frame? Even a healthy mind requires a healthy body and you lack both."

Mohsin's jibe had kept rankling in my mind for many days, more so, because what he had said, had an element of truth in it. I could myself feel my bones sticking out of my flesh. At Mohsin's insistence I started going out to the playground but my enthusiasm petered out after three days. I threw away my hockey stick and consigned myself to my favourite corner in the house. I was back to square one.

All the time I felt as if a mean and cowardly creature who suffered from an inferiority complex was lodged inside me. He dragged me down, keeping me from rising to my full stature. Whether at school or in the playground, whether on a public thoroughfare or in the privacy of the home I would lose my nerve when confronted with more than three or four people. If I saw four or five girls or boys on the road I would try to change course. And if I had perforce to walk past them it would become an ordeal for me. My face would lose its colour and my legs would start faltering as if my feet had been caught in my pajamas and I was going to have a headlong fall.

That evening while passing through Gol Bazaar with Mohsin I was assailed by some such feelings. But I tried to put

a brave face on it for fear of being ridiculed. Sometimes one is in no mood to meet people and does so only out of deference to the other person. Perhaps I had still some regard for Mohsin.

That eerie silence of the Gol Bazaar and its customless shops, flies buzzing all over the place, the tamarind trees standing still and lifeless in the open space in front and stray goats and cows wandering about in search of a titbit of food. And the shopkeepers' long-drawn yawns.

"That's Naidu's shop," Mohsin pointed his finger towards a clean shed-like structure. My nervousness increased. "Mohsin, you go in and meet him. I'll wait for you here."

"Why, aren't you coming?" Mohsin looked at me surprised. "You're a funny chap, indeed. But you wanted to meet Naidu, didn't you? That's what you said when we started from home. Are you feeling shy?"

In fact what people had been saying about P.S. Naidu had aroused my curiosity and I had once told Mohsin that I would like to meet him and now I was going back on my word.

"All right," Mohsin said in a gruff voice. "But don't ask me again." He broke away from me in a huff and did not even turn to look if I was following him. I stood undecided for a moment and then followed him into Naidu's shop.

Naidu's house consisted of two rooms with a corrugated shed-like affair in front where he received visitors and which also served as a protection against rain. Every thing was spick and span. No detail had escaped his attention. He had even sprinkled water on the red gravel path leading to the shed.

In front of the shop hung a signboard, "Naidu Sodawater Factory." He had installed two machines inside the shed to produce aerated water. Empty soda water bottles were neatly ranged in a wooden crate. In another corner of the shed rested a wooden bench and two wooden chairs. The so-called shop was in fact more like a sitting room.

"My cousin, Mohsin" formally introduced me to Naidu and then with a nod of his head asked me to take my seat on the bench. I felt greatly relieved. Tall, slim, dark-complexioned, hollow cheeks, Hitler-style moustache, black-framed glasses. His shirt made of *khadi* was threadbare and his pajamas also made

of *khadi* was frayed at the edges. But they were clean and well pressed.

"Your cousin?" Naidu took me in with a glance.

"Yes, from my mother's side," Mohsin elaborated on our relationship.

"Is he studying with you?"

"Yes, he's one class ahead of me."

Naidu again looked at me. I squirmed under his gaze and then started looking at the picture hanging on the wall. No picture of King George the Fifth or of Prafulla-kumari, the Maharani of Bastar or any other bejewelled Raja adorned his wall as they did mine. On a glass mirror was etched the figure of Bharat Mata in fetters with *Bande Matram* inscribed on top and the tri-colour in the middle. On either side of the mirror hung pictures of Mahatma Gandhi, Subhash Chandra Bose and Vallabhbhai Patel, each picture adorned with garlands of bright tin foil. I had never seen such pictures before. I had only heard the names of these personages. About Gandhi I had heard that every time the British Government had jailed him he had snapped the prison bars and come out unscathed.

In our house we had a picture of a *pir*, Baba Tajuddin. It was said that he had also performed miracles like Mahatma Gandhi. Every Thursday incense was burnt in front of his picture. But we did not have a picture of Mahatma Gandhi in our house nor was there one in any other house in our neighbourhood. Only a person like P.S. Naidu could have the courage to burn incense in front of Mahatma Gandhi's picture.

"I have not been feeling well for the past two days," Naidu said reclining back in his chair. "But I am ready to come with you. I am only waiting for the bullock cart. If I can arrange for it we shall leave on Tuesday."

"Why Tuesday? Why not on Sunday?" Mohsin asked.

"Sunday is market day," Naidu said. "Nobody is available in the village on market day. Well, are you coming?"

Mohsin thought for a moment and then said, "I would have certainly made it on Sunday. You know Abba, of course. If he gets wind of it he'll kill me."

Naidu smiled. "If you are afraid of such small things how are you going to fight the bigger battles?" he asked suddenly turning grave.

Mohsin lowered his head. He sat for sometime lost in thought. "I'm ready with the other scheme," he said in a decisive tone suddenly breaking the silence. "Some school friends are willing to join hands with me."

"Is he one of them?" Naidu looked at me.

Mohsin laughed. "I don't know," he said. "In fact I've not asked him. I've not taken him into my confidence. He's chicken-hearted."

Again the same charge against me! I gave Mohsin a defiant look. Why were all these people bent upon humiliating me?

"What makes you call me chicken-hearted?" I gave a hollow laugh trying to hide my discomfiture. But both of them ignored my question.

They started discussing one Srivastava. Mohsin told Naidu that in spite of his best efforts he had been able to enroll only a dozen members and he could not be very sure of them either. He feared that if a meeting was held in daytime they may fail to show up and the scheme may not proceed beyond the paper stage.

"I know," Naidu said in a slow, deliberate voice. "I've known this locality for the last twenty years. You can find opportunists and self-seekers everywhere; there is no dearth of them anywhere. But here only spineless people live. At the smallest sign of danger they hide their heads between their knees. They are just not concerned with other things. Now take the present situation. The whole country is in a turmoil. In small towns and big cities the movement has gathered momentum. Everybody, be he a child, a youth or an old man, is ready to lay down his head for the cause. I hear in Bengal women have taken off their bangles and have come out into the open. People are being arrested by the thousands everyday. But what's happening in our town? Not to speak of women even the male population here can think of nothing except buying tamarind and grains for the next season. Or they just sit idle with hang-dog falls. They have nothing else to talk about except the whims of the British Diwan. Sometimes I feel that Bastar is not a part of India but. . ."

A customer came and stopped at the shed leaving his sentence incomplete, Naidu rose to attend to the man and after finishing with him he returned to his seat.

"Only two days ago a man came to me at night," Naidu resumed his narration. "As you know, people generally avoid visiting me in daytime. Their jobs may be at stake or their business may suffer. This man said that he was eager to do anything for the great cause and he deeply felt for his country but was helpless because of his government job. I told him the solution was simple enough: give up your job. The man was educated and quite sensible. 'What about my family?' he asked. 'How will I feed my family?' I said, 'Look, I'm not highly educated like you. But I'm surprised at your question. Who has not to think of his family, his home? And yet there are people who are prepared to shed their blood for the country. Don't they have families to think of? Do they owe nothing to their families? But what is that something that still drives them into the jaws of death? The sacrifice something to gain something else. Don't they?' It set the man thinking. I said that if his family stood in his way I was prepared to take the burden on myself. 'This shop is yours,' I said. 'Kick aside your job. Your family can live on the income of my shop. The country wants educated people like you to jump into the fray.' Do you know what the man said?"

Naidu pused and looked at us. Our eager eyes were fixed on his face. Naidu laughed and said, "He said nothing. Not a word. He did not even exchange a glance with me. He quickly slipped out of my house. I said, 'Bhai Saheb, it's worth taking the risk. Tomorrow if the Britishers go away and our country becomes free you just start wearing *khaddur* and become a part of the new administration. Your life will be made. Even those who pluck the whiskers of a dead tiger are considered to be brave."

Mohsin started laughing. But I saw that Naidu's face had suddenly turned grave. For sometime he kept staring at the people passing on the road.

Then Mohsin said in a faint voice, "I must go now. From tomorrow I will apply my mind to the other job. I just came to tell you that I will be keeping in touch with you."

Naidu made no comment. He just listened to Mohsin as he reclined in his chair. He had given his approval through silence.

We were nearing the culvert when I saw Naidu coming after us. "I forget to tell you one thing," he said stopping Mohsin. "I have invited Vani Vilasji to give a public recitation of the Geeta,

I have got my District Committee's sanction for it. Even if they don't meet the expenses I'll bear them on my own from my shop. But it is highly desirable to have Vany Vilasji with us. It is not a religious function. I must disabuse your mind of any such notion. It is just a device to infuse life into these dead people."

"I understand what you mean," Mohsin said. "I will come tomorrow and have further instructions from you."

"What instructions? There's nothing much to be done. The only thing is. . ."

He suddenly stopped short and thought for a while. "Well, I'll tell you some other time."

As we walked down the road I looked at Mohsin. He was lost in deep thought. I was seeing Mohsin in a new light. It was not the reckless and heartless boy that I had known him to be all this time. I could never imagine that he could be so serious-minded. Were his frivolities and escapades only a mask to hide his real self? What if his father came to know about it?

"Do you know anything about Naidu's early life?" Mohsin asked me and without waiting for my reply he plunged into the subject: "He used to drive trucks and on one of his trips to Bastar he got a job and decided to stay back here. He worked on this job for many years but he never imbibed the uncouth ways of truck drivers. He lived alone almost cut off from the world. Nobody knew anything about his family background or even if he had a family. Then he gave up his job but did not go away from Bastar. He opened an aerated water shop here. But as you must have seen, this shop is just a camouflage for political work. Whatever he earns from his shop he spends for the cause."

I wondered how a man could live alone. What did he do for his food? How could he manage everything single-handed? Who looked after him when he fell ill?

"There is only one big lion living in this *basti*," Mohsin said. "The others are all jackals, capable only of howling at night. Has any man here the courage to hang pictures of the Congress leaders in his house or his shop? Once the British Diwan asked Naidu to present himself before him. He wanted Naidu to remove those pictures from his shop but Naidu refused point blank, saying that it was a matter of personal conviction. If he danced naked in the privacy of his room what objection

could the government have to it? That silenced the English bloke. What else could he do except gnash his teeth? Subsequently he put the secret police after him. But nothing happened. No one dared enter his shop. They knew he was a dangerous man and kept a dozen soda water bottles handy to deal with these people."

It was a new world for me, fearsome yet fascinating. In a milieu in which all talk were confined to the ruling princes, the clever machinations of the British Diwans and of officers winning their favours or falling from grace, any discussion on politics had hardly any place.

I realised that a wide gulf lay between Mohsin and myself. It was not only a difference of temperament and physical prowess; the difference lay in our attitudes. I felt that apart from scholastic knowledge of books to which he was rather indifferent he had a far deeper understanding of the ways of the world. Now take the case of Naidu and his dedication to the cause of national freedom. I lay under his spell when in his presence but as soon as I left his shop the effect of his talk diluted and I was reluctant to feel swayed by any thoughts of the country's freedom. I felt that but for personal advancement Naidu's activities had no roots in reality. Can a man really keep himself aloof from the normal rough and tumble of life? Is not nationalism itself something hallucinatory?

"Mohsin, may I ask you something? But please don't ridicule me for it."

"If you ask me something silly I'll certainly laugh over it. Any way what's it that you want to know?"

"Do you really have your heart in all that you are doing? I mean are you really sincere about it?"

"What do you mean?"

"Since when have you been doing this Congress Party work? Your hobnobbing with Naidu? Haven't you ever realised in all sincerity that you are cut out for something different? That you have jumped into this fray under some passing impulse?"

Mohsin gave me an intense look and then laughed. "I know what answer to make. But you will not be happy to hear it."

"Just tell me."

"Just tell me," Mohsin mimicked. "Do you take me for a dishonest person?"

"I never said that."

"As they say, a weak body and a strong mind rarely go together. And you are weak both in body and in mind. And that is why you talk in this vein."

Mohsin's remark cut me to the quick. If what Mohsin had said was true was it my fault that I was a weakling? I said with a touch of bravado, "So you think a hefty body is essential for a man to act boldly? But tell me, what's it that you can do and I can not do, if I go about it with determination?"

"Well then, do it if you can," Mohsin laughed. "Nobody is stopping you." Then he looked around and said in a conspiratorial tone, "Every morning before the start of the school we are asked to salute the Union Jack. Tomorrow you tell the Head Master that you refuse to salute the flag."

I gaped at Mohsin's face.

"I knew you won't be up to it," he said in a hard voice. "But I'm going to do it. There are some other boys who are with me in it. You can also join us if you like."

I had no ready answer for it. What was Mohsin really upto? Instead of studying he was always thinking of some devilry. He had such a destructive mind.

"How is it going to help?" I asked a little belligerently.

"That's beside the point," Mohsin replied. "If you want to join us, you are welcome. Nobody is forcing you."

There was no point in arguing with Mohsin. He had a knack of drawing people out and making them to the line.

The next day Mohsin arrived at the school much before opening time. He put his books in the class room, he kept moving from room to room and from one group to another. When the second bell rang and the school assembled in the compound under the flag many of the bigger boys marched off along with Mohsin and returned only after the salutation was over.

This continued for many days and the number of boys who assembled under the flag gradually decreased. During this period I did not meet Mohsin even once. Call it his annoyance with me or my indifference, whether in the school or outside it, he left me

severely alone. He often saw me going about but never cared to approach me.

One day something unusual happened. We had already taken our positions under the flag. The Head Master and the other teachers had also assembled on the platform. The teacher who used to conduct the ceremony asked the boys to stand at ease. The job that normally took two minutes, that morning took five minutes to finish. The students were tensely waiting to be dismissed while the teachers were looking in the direction of the main gate as if they were expecting some important visitor. After some time there was some commotion among the boys and they started talking in whispers. Then we saw ten or twelve boys coming through the main gate with bowed heads. Mohsin was among them. The Head Master came in the rear, wearing a stern expression.

Nothing untoward happened. The boys joined their respective lines. As on other days, the assembly saluted the flag and the boys dispersed to their respective classes. But those ten boys were sent to the Head Master's room. Mohsin was again among them.

Our curiosity was in vain. In spite of our best efforts we could not find out what had transpired in the Head Master's office. At last we peeped through the window and saw the boys leaving the Head Master's room with hang-dog looks. They walked out silently, without talking with one another. They entered their respective class rooms, picked up their books and went out through the main gate.

Soon after there was a circular that any boy who did not present himself for the morning salute would come in for severe punishment. Subsequently we learnt that Mohsin and those boys were not only caned but were also 'debarred' from the school for one month.

Right on the third day of this episode hundreds of school boys saw that the previous night someone had burnt down the Union Jack along with its flag staff.

A thick crowd gathering outside Naidu's Soda Water Factory, day after day, for seven days, was by itself a historic event in the life of that small town. As morning dawned people would start assembling outside the shop. Young and old,

women and children—all vied with one another to occupy the front seats.

They had placed a wooden *takht* under the shed, forming a stage for the Pandit to speak from. They had spread big *durries* in front of the stage and alongside it for the audience to sit on. Even the road in front had been encroached upon. The crowd was so big that it spilled over to the neighbouring shops and the adjoining lanes. Those in the distance who could not have a clear view of the stage created some noise before the start of the proceedings. But once the discourse began people listened in hushed silence.

Pandit Vani Vilas enjoyed a unique reputation, over wide areas . . . It was said that Saraswati, the goddess of learning, resided on his tongue and when he spoke he was carried away by his own eloquence. It was a matter of great luck for the people of Bastar to have such an illustrious personage in their midst.

Up to the last minute even Naidu had remained in doubt about the success of the function. The people had been most niggardly in contributing funds towards defraying, the expenses of the function, mainly because of the fear of the powers that be. Naidu had nevertheless gone ahead with the project, fortified by his own confidence and courage and the co-operation of one or two well-meaning friends. Learned men, being in great demand, are in ten places at the same time and as the saying goes one can never pin down a wandering monk and flowing water. Naidu had had a hard time chasing Vani Vilas who was always on the move. In spite of a prolonged correspondence lasting over many weeks it took him fifteen days to pin down the Pandit. When he reached his town Naidu learnt that the Pandit had gone to another town a hundred miles away. And when he reached there he learnt that the Pandit's next engagement in some other town had just been finalised. Naidu had to move with him from place to place before he could get a definite commitment from him. The exertion had exhausted Naidu. All the seven days that the meeting lasted he did not put himself out in any way and sat in a corner, a shawl thrown over his shoulders. He appeared to be in bad shape.

Mohsin, who had kept Naidu under constant surveillance all these days advised him to go in and have some rest.

But as before, Naidu raised his left hand indicating that

there was nothing wrong with him and he kept reclining in his chair.

Pandit Vani Vilas, being a powerful speaker, kept his audience spell bound. They listened to his discourse with intermittent clapping. But throughout Naidu sat inert, sunk in his chair, his body covered with a shawl. Sometimes he would raise his head and try to sit up.

But as the Pandit came to the thirteenth chapter of the Geeta, Naidu's spirits suddenly revived. Although he still looked ill and his face drained of all blood, a new strength seemed to have surged through him.

It was the same stage and the same Vani Vilas. As Naidu sat up the shawl slipped from his head and falling over his shoulders slipped down at his back revealing the rib cage of his emaciated body under his thin *khadi* kurta. But he let the shawl lie where it had fallen. His face glowed as he fixed his eyes on the speaker's face.

A cold wind was blowing. "*Bhaiyya*, cover yourself with the shawl," Mohsin said and tried to pick up the shawl which had fallen on the chair at Naidu's back. But Naidu stopped him. At the other end of the stage the petromax lamp had gone dim for lack of pumping.

Vaniji continued with his discourse: "Unless we realise that we are detached from our body the tyrants would keep tyrannising over us. They will keep us in slavery and inflict all sorts of cruelty on us. We must free our minds of fear because the tyrant tries to instil fear in his victim. A demon had enslaved a man and he put him to all sorts of hardships. If the man refused to obey him he would threaten to gobble him up. In the beginning the man was terribly afraid of him but at last when he could not stand his cruelty any longer, in despair he said, "All right, come and eat me up!" But the demon had no intention of eating up the man. He wanted to have a slave under his thumb. His bluff having been called, he stopped tormenting the man. The tormentor knows that a man wants to keep body and soul together. When the body is subjected to pain the man becomes the tormentor's slave in order to escape further inflictions. Therefore, one must learn to bear pain. The moment one learns this secret one becomes one's own master."

A strange expression had crept over Naidu's face. He

gripped the arms of his chair and his body shook like a banana leaf with excitement. He closed his eyes and started clapping.

In that big gathering only the sound of his clapping resounded in the air. Others sat unmoved. Then taking a cue from Naidu, Mohsin and myself and two more persons sitting behind us also started clapping. But still there was no response from the large audience sitting in front of us. Only a few more belatedly started clapping at which the bulk of the audience expressed bewilderment.

A curtain seemed to have been whisked away from before my eyes. Through this discourse Naidu wanted to convey a clear message to the people revelatory of their inner urges. But how many people had caught the point?

On the last day of the discourse the audience had almost doubled but unfortunately, Naidu could not attend the meeting for more than a few minutes. Mohsin led him into the inner room to rest and he did not come out till the end.

At the termination of the function which dragged on till late at night Vani Vilas was deluged with gifts of clothes, dhotis, sweets and coconuts. The offering made to him in the shape of money was far beyond his expectations. But Naidu was not there to mark the people's fervour. He was lying in his room, his eyes were closed. Even the excitement outside his shop did not seem to have percolated to his ear.

At the conclusion of the function Pandit Vani Vilas came to Naidu's room, accompanied by two or three people.

A lamp resting in the alcove was casting a pale light over Naidu's bed set against the wall. Two or three boxes were resting in a corner over which a few unwashed clothes hung from a peg. A few canisters, some empty, others full, lay scattered in another part of the room.

"*Bhaiyya*, Panditji has come," Mohsin whispered in Naidu's ear.

"Naidu *bhai*, Naidu *bhai*," Pandit Vani Vilas bent over Naidu's cot.

Naidu opened his eyes and kept staring at Pandit's and others' faces as they stood there leaning over his cot. Perhaps it took him some time to recognise them. As their faces came alive in his memory he struggled to sit up but Pandit Vani Vilas

gently held him by his shoulders. "Keep lying, keep lying," he said and eased him down on the cot.

The night had advanced and one could hear the heavy thump of the policeman's boots falling on the road as he went on his rounds, his whistle peering through the darkness.

Pandit Vani Vilas left the next morning. Mohsin saw him off at the bus stand in place of Naidu who was unable to come. Many admirers were also there and they kept hovering around him till the bus left. They invited him to come again. But nobody, it seemed, had missed Naidu.

They had not thought of Naidu at the time of making the offerings. Nobody had cared to remember the running about he had done to fetch the Pandit and the money he had provided for the function that had lasted as many as seven days. Where had all this money come from? Only one or two persons had held out some sort of assurance to begin with, and he had gone to fetch Vani Vilas on the strength of that vague assurance, hoping that in the end everything would take care of itself. Call it sheer coincidence, none of his promoters was present on the final day.

Soon everything was lost in the limbo of time. Naidu and the function which had become the talk of the town were forgotten; or at best they ended up as a happy memory.

I don't know anything about Mohsin. But as for myself after that I visited Naidu's shop several times, sat with him in both his rooms but my mind never went to the aerated water machines which I always saw lying in a corner of the room.

"Bhaiyya, where is the second machine?" One day Mohsin suddenly asked Naidu soon after he had started attending to his work.

It was only then I noticed that the space where the second machine used to rest was now vacant. It was like seeing Sallo Apa without bangles on her wrists or our teacher Mukerji without his spectacles. The machine had become so much a part of the room.

"I sold it off," Naidu said as his eyes roved to the empty space in the room.

"But why?"

"What do you mean why? I was in need of money. One

sells things only when one needs money. As you know I was not doing well in my business and on top of that I had to arrange for Vani Vilas's function. All this required money."

We looked at him stunned. "So you burnt your own house to pay for this fun?" Mohsin remarked.

Naidu lifted his legs from the ground and pulling them up threw his arms around his knees. For sometime he sat there staring at the road and then said in a broken voice, "But I don't even have a house to burn. I've only burnt my heart out. I don't know what I'm going to do next. Mohsin, the people of this place have proved a big disappointment. They have betrayed me. They promised to help me with money but went back on their word."

I had never seen Naidu Bhaiyya so dispirited and distraught. He was a broken man. Why had it escaped my noticed that he was by now a physical wreck? His body was reduced to bones. One could even count his ribs under his shirt. I had got a clear indication of it that night when Vani Vilas had come to bid fare well to him.

"Naidu bhai, tell me if I can be of any help to you," Vani Vilas had asked.

Naidu had turned his sad eyes on him and then closed them. "I feel ashamed that I could not be of service to you," he said opening his eyes. "I had great hopes. But now it's no use talking about them. Panditji, you must forgive me."

"*Che, che*, what are you saying?"

"I'm not wrong in what I'm saying. You've seen the people of this place. What more can I say?"

"Naidu bhai, people are not the same everywhere," Vani Vilas had said. "It's for people like you to guide them to the right path."

"No, the people here are cast in a different mould. They will remain as they are. I've been living in Bastar for years and thought that I knew these people inside out. But I was mistaken. These people hear everything but understand nothing. Our country may change but not these people."

Vani Vilas had tried to console Naidu by saying that there was a time for everything. Fruits do not grow out of season even if you tend them most carefully.

A long time ago a boy had jumped into the tank in front of Uncle's house to pluck *singharas*. He did not know how to swim. Oh, how desperately he struggled to save himself from drowning. A most agonising sight, which I will not forget all my life.

IN spite of our fervent prayers we were one day driven out of our ancestral house. How long can one hold on to a place over which one has lost one's right, even if one tries to avert the calamity by making false excuses? Moving day to day, at the fateful moment at last arrived, the last thing which Amma would have liked to see through her tear-dimmed eyes.

Till then I had not realised how precious a piece of land can be . . . The house had been sold, making us homeless. Along with others I was also grieving over the calamity which I had never even imagined. There are calamities which cast their shadows in advance. The fear is more tormenting than the actual happening. But some calamities are so remote and far fetched

that we never think that they would ever come to pass. And when they do come to pass we are not able to accept them.

I see a lot of things being taken out of the house—half a dozen charpoys, a big teak bedstead, rolls of *nivars*, old and new cooking utensils, big and small canisters to hold articles of food, coal-black pots, an assortment of beddings, a grind-stone, bamboo sticks and other miscellany of household articles.

I wish I had not seen Amma standing in their midst. Bare-headed, her clothes bearing dark stains, her hands coated with dust, she keeps looking at the things with a dead-pan expression. Then she turns to look at the house and her eyes remain glued to it while Sophia and I pester her with questions. She hears us and yet does not hear us.

At last when the bullock cart drove away with the luggage it dawned upon us with a sudden newness that the house was gone for good. The age old roof would no longer be over our heads. Nor those walls or that homely atmosphere. Where could we have another house with such a big courtyard? Those guawa trees, that yam tree, spread out like a jungle and the mango tree in the middle of the courtyard. When grandmother was alive she had performed the marriage of this mango tree with great eclat.

"What's all this rubbish?" Abba thundered as he saw Sophia coming with a basket. He was standing by the bullock cart supervising the loading for its second trip. Sophia held out the basket before Abba for him to see. The basket contained empty bottles and empty cigarette cartons.

"What will you do with them?" he asked wryly.

"Amma asked me to . . ."

"Your Amma be blown!" Abba cried. He snatched away the basket from Sophia, cast a cursory glance at its contents and threw it away. The bottles broke and their shards scattered all over the place.

Amma was watching all this from a distance. "Why have you thrown away the bottles?" she asked in a bitter voice. "What harm were they doing you?"

"And what good were they doing me, may I ask?" Abba cried, "I don't want to load trash and add to the weight."

"Are household things trash?"

"You call these household things? Are broken and discarded

bottles household things? What will you do with them? Place them under your grave? We may be poor but we are not beggars that we should crave for these broken pieces of glass."

"That's what we have come to," Amma said, looking at the broken pieces of glass.

Sophia removed the remanants from the house, one by one, and putting them together stood aside, watching her father with fearstricken eyes. I failed to understand why my parents fell out over trifles. Couldn't they see eye to eye with each other over anything?

Good that Abba contented himself by gnashing his teeth, without creating a scene. Otherwise, even at the time of final parting from the house he would have left behind a legacy of bitterness and tears.

When the bullock cart started Amma kept lifting the back curtain and wistfully looking at the house which was not her's anymore. The house was firmly standing there, its walls intact as before. Its small windows seemed to be blinking at us. Then the outer steps of the house became hazy as the distance between us increased after which the doors were obliterated from view . . The row of guava trees blurred into a blob of green and then there was nothing left to see except a tiled roof. It was all over. Along with our house the locality had also become alien territory.

We had been in the new house only a week. We had yet to unpack our things and they lay cluttered up in one room, the contents of some of the packages gaping at us, their mouths half-open. We had yet to take to our new house.

Accustomed to living in a spacious house with many rooms, we felt stifled in the new three-room affair as if we had been bottled up in it.

As I said, there were three rooms in all. A small vestibule in front, a room leading from it and another dark and dingy room adjacent to it. Half of the back verandah had been improvised into a make-shift kitchen. And then there was some open space which passed for a courtyard. It seemed that Fate had ordained that of all the houses of Jagdalpur this one should fall to our lot. To make matters worse, it was situated in a locality where no decent family would care to live.

A narrow lane taking off from the left of our house led to

the locality of opium eaters. This lane remained busy from morning till night. They were queer looking people and for a long time Amma nursed a grouse against Abba for having dumped the family among low caste drug-addicts and drug peddlers. She feared that one day some badmashes would enter our house and decamp with everything including the kitchen utensils.

Once or twice a week a posse of policemen was seen entering or leaving that lane. It was a common sight to see one or two and sometimes many more hand-cuffed men being led away by a policeman. The arrested men were generally middle aged and in rags and some of them fairly old. From their faces it appeared that they had been caught while sleeping. We never knew what punishment was meted-out to them. But after a week or so we again saw them going about in the lane and we were led to believe that the police station was akin to a mosque for them where they religiously paid weekly visits.

Our neighbourhood in no way presented a better picture. But for a handful of comparatively better off families the rest belonged to the lower strata of society, such as rickshawpullers, carpenters, labourers and the like. They were away from home the whole day while this children, mostly naked, played in the dust on the road, neglected and uncared for. At night the males got boozed up, and one could hear their drunken laughter or shouts emerging from their hovels while their women hurled filthy abuses at them or shrieked at being belaboured. "Help! help! the wretch is going to murder me! May your face be singed! May your hand rot with leprosy! You call yourself a man? I spit on your face. Ak—thoo!"

From the very first day we felt suffocated in our new house. In our old house we were reluctant to invite visitors for the atmosphere there always remained tense while in the new house we did not have enough space even to wiggle our fingers much less find some room for a visitor to sit.

There were occasions when I saw an acquaintance passing by our house. I would immediately turn away from the door. And if I could not do so in time I would turn a blind eye to him as if I had not seen him.

Today I may laugh at my ostrich-like behaviour but in those days the situation was nothing short of a tragedy. I did

not want to display my poverty; it made me feel very small.

That evening though it had become dark we had not lighted the lamp for want of kerosene. We begged a little from this man and a little from that and it was only then that we could procure kerosene just enough to light the lamp in the central room. Sophia had just lighted the lamp when Amma said that someone wanted me outside.

As I came out I saw a tall and slim figure in coat and pants and wearing a cap outlined against the pervading darkness. I tried hard but failed to recognise the face, it being shrouded in darkness. "Babban!"

A tremor ran down my spine. It was Sallo Apa.

"Who? Sallo A...!" I was so thrilled that the 'p' of Apa stuck in my throat.

"Yes, It's me, Sallo Apa," she whispered placing her hand over my mouth. Before I could speak she dragged me towards the culvert outside our lane. "Now we can speak," she laughed.

I surveyed Sallo Apa in her male dress. "Sallo Apa, what has come over you?" I said without making any effort to hide my surprise.

"Why, do I look bad in this dress?" she laughed again. "You people wear it every day. I thought I'll also try for once.

"Whom have you borrowed them from?"

"Guess. But don't be alarmed. I've not stolen them. They are Mohsin's."

"But why did you do it? If someone were to recognise you?"

"Nobody will recognise me at night. That's why I've come after nightfall. And then I've taken one more precaution to throw people off the scent." She took out a packet of cigarettes and a match box from her pocket. She put a cigarette between her lips and lighted it. She took a pull at the cigarette and asked between coughing, "Tell me, can anyone take me for a girl?"

It gave me a jolt. I had heard that European women smoked like males. But I could never imagine an Indian girl and a girl of our own family at that, smoking a cigarette.

I pulled the cigarette from between her lips and threw it away. "What's wrong with you?" I gave her a reproachful look.

But she just laughed as if I was being childish.

"You think I don't know how to smoke?" she said. "I can even blow out smoke from my eyes. Want to see me doing it?"

Of course, she was joking. But for me there was nothing very amusing about it.

"All right, jokes apart, I was forgetting that I've come on a serious errand." She suddenly turned grave. "Has Mohsin come here?"

"No, he would have come out if he were in the house."

"I don't mean that," She said in a grave voice. "Didn't he meet you sometime in the course of the day?"

"No, why what's the matter? Anything wrong?"

She started looking the other way. "I wonder where he could have gone " she said, looking thoughtful.

I could not resist asking a host of questions that came crowding in my mind. Had something untoward happened? Since when had he been missing? Did he have a row with some one?

Without enlightening me on any of these points Apa just said, "Do you mind escorting me to my house, I'll tell you everything on the way "

"Wait, I'll leave word behind," I said turning back. In fact I wanted to gain time to get over my jitters.

"So you people live here?"

"Yes. But how did you find out?"

"Just by asking I kept asking?"

We walked a long part of the distance in silence as if none of us was in a mood to revert to that unsavoury subject.

"I hope you did not tell Aunt that I had called." At last Sallo Apa broke the silence.

"How could I?"

"You did well. You must be wondering why I have changed into this male dress I myself laughed when I looked at my reflection in the mirror. Of course, I looked a male all right. But I had a problem in hiding my hair and plait. I did not know what to do about it. At last it occurred to me that Abba's hat would do the trick and in consequence I had also to don his coat. Babban Bhaiyya, at first I lost my nerve. Time and again I came to the door and returned. I was feeling very jittery.

What if I accidentally ran into Abba? That would be the death of me. Or if someone recognised me. But soon my courage returned."

"But where was the necessity for all this rigmarole? Did you have any special mission on hand?"

"No, there was nothing special. I just wanted to come to your house to find out if Mohsin was with you. He has been missing since last night. All through the day we have been searching for him in all possible places. If we had had good neighbours I would have sent you a word through one of them. But no one comes up to dab lime paste on a cut finger. And I could not stand Amma's crying. So I set out from home as soon as it became dark."

"But you could as well come without changing into a male attire."

"Oh no, how could I come all the way all by myself?"

"And haven't you come alone now?"

"But that is different. If a girl goes out of her house at night or won't people start making conjectures? They would become curious for nothing. But there is no such problem when one is in male dress. Even under the blazing light."

Somehow I failed to appreciate Apa's subterfuge. Was it that I expected a girl to be simple and straightforward in her thinking? Would a girl resort to trickery and guile to achieve her end? Anyway, Apa's behaviour smacked of Bombay films.

I looked at Apa. She had removed her hat but her plaits were still tucked under her coat. She presented a strange appearance—attractive and at the same time odd. And the jaunty manner in which she was walking. As far as I was concerned the over-all effect was not happy. Every action, every gesture of her betrayed fear and lack of confidence.

"I knew I would be scared stiff if I ran into some known person," Apa said. "My legs shook as I walked and I feared that I may fall any moment. But I kept walking. This boy Mohsin has thrown the whole house in turmoil."

"But still you've not told me what has happened," I said in a plaintive tone.

"What did you do in school?" she asked after a pause.

"When?"

"Aha! Don't pretend that you do not know about the

mischief I am talking about. You burnt the government flag, didn't you? You had formed a group for it."

I became cautious. It was true that we had formed a group and it was equally true that Mohsin had taken the initiative in refusing to salute the Union Jack and was punished for it. But the flag had been burnt at night and they had carried out investigations over a number of days. They had not been able to get conclusive evidence against anyone. Had some new evidence come up in the meanwhile?

"Yes, I know," I said. "A few days ago someone had burnt the government flag."

"It was not someone. It was Mohsin." Apa was emphatic on that point. "He was even marked absent for a few days by way of punishment. He had kept it a secret from us. But for the Head Master's letter we would have remained in the dark about this mis-adventure also."

"What letter? What misadventure?"

"Mohsin has been rusticated from the school. Don't you know that?"

I stopped in my tracks. After the flag episode every boy of the school had started avoiding Mohsin though none said so in so many words. The boys would only look at him with suspicious whenever he passed by them. Nobody knew if there was any truth behind. At least I for one had no knowledge of it. And Mohsin was the last person to take me into his confidence.

"You know how wrathful Abba can be," Apa said. "He goes blind with rage. The other day there was murder in his eyes. He flared up as he read the letter. First he came down upon Amma, holding her responsible for pampering her son and then he took Mohsin to task. Oh, how mercilessly he beat him! As one beats a bullock. He would stop for a while to take rest and then start beating him again. "Sala; Goes on a spree instead of studying! I'm spending scarce money by sending you to school and you want to be a Congressite. I know you are under the spell of that soda-water man. I warn you, one day this boy will be the undoing of our entire family. I may even lose my job because of him. And he will lose nothing by it. Worst comes to worst, he will set up a *pann* shop." In spite of the thrashing Mohsin did not utter a word of protest. So Abba tied down his hands and feet and threw him outside the house

where he lay under the sun. "Let him starve to death!" Abba said. "If anybody comes to his help I'll give him right and left." Amma kept weeping all the time, pleading that he was a child after all and prone to folly. "You will never understand!" Abba fumed. "The boy is a rebel. He is against our government. He used to deceive us and absent himself from school to go to the villages with that soda-water man to preach sedition against the government. Look at the audacity of this boy who is no bigger than my thumb. At least he should have shown some regard for his father. If I lose my job because of his misdeeds what will happen to you? You will go from door to door begging for food." Babban Bhaiyya, I could not stand Abba's wrath and Mohsin's cursedness. And Amma was wailing so piteously. Mohsin lay under the sun for full three hours. In the evening when he was untied he went out of the courtyard and disappeared from the house. Amma clung to his shirt to stop him from going but he did not care. There is no care or concern in his heart."

A sigh escaped my lips and I looked at Apa's face. There was not even a trace of anxiety on her face. Can one remain unconcerned after such a terrible happening?

"Amma has been crying since yesterday," Apa said in a voice full of anxiety. "She is waiting for you in the hope that you may be able to give some clue to his whereabouts. Abba gets angry if we ask him to trace him. 'Let the rascal die!' he fumes. 'Let me see whom he adopts as his father.'" Babban Bhaiyya, as I can see he is not in your house and you say that you have not met him for many days. Are you sure you do not know about his whereabouts?"

Poor, helpless me! How was I to convince these people that I was unaware of his whereabouts? Who would believe me if I told them that though I kept company with him and moved about with him we were not friends in that sense of the word? He never opened out to me. Perhaps he took me for a weakling, not worthy of his confidence. I recalled my first visit to Naidu's shop. The discussions they had together still echoed in my mind. Could it be that Mohsin was hiding in Naidu's shop?

"Mind that pot-hole!" Sallo Apa warned me. I suddenly realised that we had almost reached her house. It was just

nearing eight but the people of the locality had already shut themselves up in their houses. Only the doors of two houses were still open. In front of one house two people sat chatting together and in the other I could hear the sound of a drum and women singing a folk-song.

"Apa, I'll go now," I said as we reached Apa's house.

"Why, won't you like to meet Amma?"

I thought there was no point in meeting Aunt at that time as I had nothing new to tell her about Mohsin. But Apa insisted on my meeting her. "At least show her your face," she said. "Otherwise she will think I've come alone."

It was dark. She caught my hand and led me into the house. "First let me change," she said as she headed for her room.

I was reminded of the doing she had unceremoniously pushed me out of her room when her father had unexpectedly appeared in the house. Tonight I was again going into her room, like a thief in the night. For a moment she stood against the door listening and then gently closed the door.

Except for some insignificant changes the room had remained unaltered. The only difference was that at that time I had entered her room in the day and today I was entering it at night. A small unshaded lamp was shedding a pale light over the room.

I looked closely at Apa. Mohsin was tall and well-built but she appeared to be an inch taller than him. Like him, she also had a firm and filled-out body. The coat fitted her all right but the pants were tight at the thighs and a little short at the ankles.

After removing her hat she hung her coat over a peg and advanced towards the lamp resting on a low box. Its wavering flame seemed to be sinking every moment. Her back towards me, I watched her every moment as she bent to raise the wick from its socket. If she did not have pig-tails nobody could have said that it was a girl's body. Her strong shoulders and her young fleshy back. . . And then I saw her leaning forward to raise the wick.

For a fleeting instant my eyes remained glued to her body and I felt hot blood rushing through my veins. I looked away. What a vulgar dress she was wearing.

On the walls hung two cinema pictures and a couple of calendars in garish colours. There were also a few dark holes

used for sticking joss sticks. The bedding on the cot had been rolled up and a sari and a petticoat lay carelessly thrown on the exposed strings of the cot.

Once again Sallo Apa came within the range of my vision. She glanced at me, pushed aside her sari and picking up the petticoat from the cot, cast a swift glance at me and then stood there as if undecided.

I cursed myself for being caught in a wrong place. I nervously looked towards the door. It was closed. I tried to listen for any sound outside the room. But no sound came. I knew Apa was waiting to change her clothes. But my presence in that narrow room was adding to her hesitancy as she stood there holding her petticoat. "Apa, do you want me to go out?"

Spreading out the palm of her left hand she swiftly stepped up to me and patting me on my shoulder gestured me not to go out but stay where I was. She warily opened one flap of the door and peeped out. Then she gently closed the door and shook her head. "No."

But why not? Allah, what was going to happen next?

Then she whispered in my ear, "Stay here. Abba will be coming presently. I'll change in a minute."

"You mean here?" I looked at her incredulously.

"Why not?"

"Oh, it's nothing." I fell silent. How could I remind her that I, a male, was standing before her? Didn't Apa know? Must I remind her about it?

Perhaps she had realised what was passing in my mind. "Oh, I see," smiled. "But I am not afraid of you. You are still a child before me. Till the other day you used to roam naked before me."

I did not relish Apa's remarks. In what way I was a child and not a man? Of late I had been noticing a change in the colour of my hair below my groin. My neck had become thicker and the hair over my lip had started showing. That day in the bathroom I had poured water over my thighs with my cupped hands and had derived pleasure from brushing down my hair and looking at the thigh. And yet Apa was saying that I was still a child in her eyes.

"Don't run away!" Taking a few steps Apa stopped abruptly and turned her head to her right. Giving me a side-

long glance she pulled out the end of her shirt from under her trousers. Then throwing her petticoat over her head like a balloon she slipped it down over her shoulders. Holding its cord strings between her teeth she held the petticoat over her bosom and then facing the wall she lowered her head.

I wanted to run away from her room. Could there be anything more humiliating for me? I felt it was not she but I who was changing my clothes and Sallo had entered my room while I was still changing. My palms became damp with perspiration and I felt as if thorns had grown in my throat, making it difficult for me to swallow. But I could neither cough to clear my throat, nor could I swallow my spittle due to those thorns.

"Where were you all this time? Were you dead?" Sallo's mother cried as she saw us coming.

Sallo wavered for a moment and then regained her composure. "I was held up at Babban's house," she replied in a matter of fact tone. "I was in a hurry to leave but Aunt detained me. Wasn't it so, Babban?" Sallo looked at me for corroboration.

"You mean she kept chatting with you for two hours?" Sallo's Amma said in a gruff voice. "You left in the afternoon, didn't you?"

This time Apa made no reply. She looked at me and lowered her head.

Two hours! But she had come to my house only half an hour ago. Where had she spent the remaining one and a half hours? Was she telling a lie to cover up another lie?

"But you had gone with the neighbour's boy. He dropped in just after fifteen minutes of your leaving. He wanted to have some vegetables."

"Amma, I had sent him back."

"Why?"

"I thought Babban was there to escort me back home."

"Should I call that boy?" Aunt cried, this time a little louder. "I'll ask him to confirm your statement. Or I'll take you to your Aunt. Why are you silent, you wretch? you *haramzadi*!"

Aunt got up angrily, caught Apa by her hair and shook her wildly. "Tell me, where were you all this time?" she cried. "With whom had you gone out? And where?"

As her mother pulled her hair she gave her a pained look and her face became hideous with impotent rage. "I'm telling you, I've been to Babban's house," she whined cried.

"You were not there, I know," her mother cried. "You couldn't have spent so much time at Babban's house. Your Aunt doesn't have two hours to waste on you. She has her own problems to think of. Sallo, look, you must tell me the truth. Or, let your father come. He will pull the skin off your bones."

I had never seen that mild-tempered and soft-spoken woman in such rage. Her hair flying, her eyes gleaming, her face tingling, even her *pallav* had slipped from her bosom.

At last Apa said, "I had been to Zaibun's house."

"Why? Where was the urgency of going to her house? Babban, did she go to Zaibun's house?"

I had already told one lie by my tacit silence just to save Apa's skin. But this time I had no alternative except professing my ignorance.

"Very well", Aunt let go of Apa's hair and sat down looking utterly resigned.

"Everyone wants to have his own way in my house," she said resignedly. "Mohsin has had it out on us and now it is your turn. Allah, take me under your protection. Relieve me of these daily agonies. Instead of pecking at my flesh bit by bit why don't you people poison me and be done with it?"

Aunt started crying. Sallo Apa was already crying, sitting away from her mother. I looked utterly foolish sitting in their midst and silently mumbled a prayer that Uncle may not show up while I was there.

At last Aunt composed herself and to my great relief, as if shedding the present from her troubled mind she started telling me about Mohsin. Perhaps these were the moments I had been dreading most. But when I came to think of it, I realised that there was something else weighing upon our minds which we had been trying to make light of.

I wondered why Sallo had tried to hide from me her visit to Zaibun. And where did she get hold of that packet of cigarettes? Nobody smoked in her house. When I came out I was confronted with two enigmas—one of them as tantalising as reading from the pages of a book fluttering in the sharp wind.

I was not given to loitering in the bazaar but during those three or four days that was exactly what I did.

During the course of my loitering I dropped in at Naidu's shop. This was my first visit after the function for Vani Vilas. The shop looked quiet and sleepy. The big crate which used to hold soda water-bottles was lying empty and the soda-water machine, the one left, was lying neglected, covered with dust. There were no imprints of feet at the spot where customers normally waited to have their orders brought. The easy chair stood folded against the wall.

I could not believe that the shop could look so shabby for Naidu was a stickler for neatness. I stood at the door for a while and then fixing my eyes on the curtain across the door of the middle room called, "Naidu Bhaiyya, Naidu Bhaiyya!"

No response. It was the silence of the grave. But I had a hunch that Naidu was somewhere inside and I was in no mind to go back without meeting him. I pushed aside the curtain and peered inside. What met my eyes made my heart pound hard with fear. Naidu's cot was set against the wall and he was sitting mute on a dirty, sunken bed, looking like a ghost, his eyes fixed at the door.

I lost my nerve as I saw him fixedly staring at me as if with unseeing eyes. He was reclining in his cot. I hesitated. I had never been bold enough to barge into somebody's room in this manner.

"Naidu Bhaiyya, did Mohsin come here?" Stepping across the threshold I moved closer to his cot.

"Who?" He kept staring at me "Mohsin? Which Mohsin?"

If Naidu had suddenly got transformed and had started looking robust and healthy or had changed from dark to fair it would not have caused me as much surprise as his question did.

"Don't you know Mohsin?" I said. "Do you recognise me?"

He stared at me as if he was seeing me for the first time. What had happened to him? A man may become weak and suffer from debility but he does not lose his memory in this manner. When I repeated my question he asked if Mohsin was still alive.

"What are you saying?" I looked at Naidu aghast. "Has

something happened to Mohsin?" I swallowed hard. Something seemed to have stuck in my throat.

"How do I know what's happened to him?"

"You mean . . .?"

"What's the matter with you? Are you dead so soon? You, who were born just the other day. And look at me, I've been living here all alone for years on end. Maybe I'm dying now and after a few days my body will become cold and lifeless. But one thing. I can assure you that even my body will be heavier and bigger than your living body."

Fearing that I may collapse if I stayed there a moment longer I ran out of his room. I just ran on and on, dazedly looking to my right and left but not knowing where I was going, so upset had I got. When I stopped running I found that my shirt was open at my neck, my breath was coming fast and sweat was pouring down my ears . . .

Had Mohsin really . . . ? No, it could not be true. Otherwise, the whole town would have known about it. But what about Naidu? What had come over him that he took everybody for dead?

Oh, God! may all this have no substance, I prayed silently and tried to obliterate the ugly picture that was forming in my mind. But I would not feel reassured till I had seen Mohsin?

As promised, I should have gone to Aunt to give her the good news about Mohsin. But my meeting with Naidu had so un-nerved me that I gave up the idea of going to Aunt's house, partly because I could not gather enough courage to do so. To go back to my story, I was loitering in the bazaar when I ran into Mohsin. He was standing in front of a shop, a bag in his hand, buying some grocery.

"Mohsin!" I cried from across the road and ran towards him like mad, crashing into the pedestrians.

"Mohsin, where were you all these days?" I asked, as I stood there gaping at him.

But Mohsin took no particular notice of me as if it was just a routine meeting. He bought *dal*, chillis, a bar of soap, tea, sugar and other miscellaneous household items. There was a separate container for *ghee*.

"Have you come to buy something?" he asked me after he had finished his shopping.

"No, I came just to meet you," I said. "We have been looking for you for many days. Where were you all this time?"

"Why, I was here all the time. Where else could I go?"

"What do you mean here? And who are you buying all these things for?"

From his oblique remark I guessed to my great relief that Mohsin had already been to his house.

Of course I was curious to know when he had returned and where he had spent these days but then I thought that it would be inopportune to rake up this subject at this stage.

"I'll be going to Kondagaun," Mohsin said slowly.

"What for?"

"I'll be joining a school there. Haven't you heard the news? They have rusticated me from the local school. Abba will be too happy to get rid of me. He says it will do me good to stay in a boarding school. The Master there will knock me into shape." Mohsin laughed mirthlessly. "Jagdapur has made a beast of me. At Kondagaun they will hammer me back into a human being."

It was indeed foolish of me not to have visited Aunt's house to keep myself abreast of the happenings. All along I had been hunting high and low for Mohsin while he was simply at home. It was like running after a crow for your ear while your ear was intact. Mohsin was right. I was slow-witted.

"Have you been to Naidu Bhaiyya?" I asked him to cover up my embarrassment.

"Yes, I've met him."

"I've also been to him in your absence. In fact I had gone there to look for you. His behaviour struck me as rather queer. I don't know what has come over him. He talks like a mad man."

Mohsin picked up his bag and came out of the shop. "Yes, he struck me also as mad," Mohsin said. "We call him mad and in turn he calls us mad. But it is difficult to decide who is mad: he or we? But if you come to think of it could there be anyone madder than him? He had been searching for greenery in a desert."

"And have you noticed one thing more?" Mohsin continued. "Whether it is due to illness, failure, or shock at being betrayed, he does not spare anybody. Sometimes he goes out of his shop

and starts abusing the neighbouring shopkeepers. 'All of you will die a dog's death.' " he warns them.

Was it the same Naidu who had such a halo round his name and whom the police and the CID used to shadow all the time? Who had single-handed raised the flag of revolt over the white dust of Bastar? And now he has grovelling in the same dust.

The next day Mohsin left for Kondagaun. I went to the bus stand to see him off.

"Mohsin, you think you'll feel at home at Kondagaun?"

"How can I tell you unless I go and live there?"

"So you'll be putting up in the school hostel?"

"That remains to be seen."

"Will you write to me? That's the only way of keeping in touch."

Mohsin made a non-committal reply. He just smiled and while getting into the bus asked me to inform Naidu Bhaiyya that he had gone to Kondagaun.

But after that day's bitter experience I was in no mood to visit Naidu again. What Mohsin had said about him had further disheartened me. In spite of having given word to Mohsin I did not call on Naidu. I passed by his shop while returning from the bus stand. The shop was there all right but looking at its closed door no one could say that there was anyone living inside.

Then I suddenly stopped in my tracks and gave a start as I read the sign board hanging on the door.

Naidu Soda-water Factory.

Prop: P. C. Naidu.

Jagdulpur: The City of the Dead.

AUNT Sighed Deeply and Resting her Head Upon her Right Knee Started Looking the other way.

What could be more tragic than today that my hapless Aunt should be discharging the responsibility that was by rule, enjoined upon Sallo Apa? But alas, where was Sallo Apa? She was just not there.

I had observed that Aunt's expression had hardened at the mere mention of Apa's name. She looked at me as if she wanted to tell me something. She lowered her head and after thinking for a while as if she was bracing herself to face some

ordeal, she placed two chapatis in an empty plate lying in front of her. These chapatis were on Sallo Apa's behalf.

There had been an interval of seven years and during this long period of time Sallo Apa's painful memory seemed to have lost its sting. But I had never realised that that pain would again flare up even after the passage of such a long time. Why was I of all persons, singled out by destiny to read her *fateha* on the day of *Shab-e-barat*? And that too in her paternal house where the sound of her ankle-bells was still sleepily clinging to its walls.

I had felt gloomy even before I had started reciting the *fateha*. I raised my hand and to my dismay found myself unable to utter even a single word. I just sat there abstractedly gazing at the lines on my palm between which I imagined I saw Sallo Apa's image forming hazily and then fading out.

How strange that sometimes memories which we think are vividly etched in our minds fail to take shape before our eyes. Even if they do, they are so faint that they look unfamiliar to us. They slip out of our minds as water slips out from between our fingers, only leaving the fingers wet.

Sometimes I felt that I was teetering between reality and illusion and that any moment Sallo Apa may appear before my eyes, wearing her long sweeping *garara*. "How are you Babban?" she would smile sitting down by my side.

What else could I do except respond to the illusion with a wan smile?

"Wait, I've forgotten to get *afshan*," Aunt said and got up to get the packet of *afshan* herbs.

I looked up at Aunt in surprise. "I thought it was meant only for married women," I said.

"Yes, I know," Aunt said in a pained voice. "True, Sallo died unmarried but the *fateha* is being read for her soul. Don't you remember in spite of my beating she was fond of putting *afshan* in the parting of her hair. She pleaded with me to allow her to use it just for once but she could not get over the temptation till the very end. Unfortunate woman that I am, little did I know that one day. . ."

Aunt's voice choked and she thrust the end of her *anchal* into her mouth. They were agonising moments for me. For once

I thought of asking her the question that had remained locked in my mind for so many years but I desisted, considering the delicacy of the moment. I kept sitting with bowed head.

Today why do I feel embarrassed when thinking of Sallo Apa? Am I guilty in some way? Why do I try to shy away from facts? Is there some sense of guilt lodged in my sub-conscious mind which keeps haunting me without my being aware of it?

"What stopped you from coming even if Mohsin was not there?" Sallo Apa had asked me in an authoritative tone. I faltered. Even when I left I felt that question had kept chasing me.

"Did I ever say that I won't visit you?" One day I asked Apa finding her in a cheerful mood.

"No, you never said that."

"So?"

"So what? I had said it casually. Now that your friend is not here I thought you wouldn't be interested in coming over to our house."

"But you are in the house," the words just escaped my lips.

"Hai!" Apa gave her characteristic smile. "How sweet of you! Am I your friend? Don't say it before others. It can create havoc."

"Why?" I looked at Apa in surprise. "Are you a foe if not a friend?"

"I may not be your foe but to call me friend means something different." She smiled. "And from tomorrow don't take the liberty of calling me by my name."

I felt hurt at her remark But I gave a hollow laugh just to hide my real feeling.

"I'll call you by your name," I said in mock defiance. "Not once but a thousand times. Saliha, Sallo. Are you happy?"

Apa started laughing and then tried to twist my ear in mock anger. "All right, I forgive you this time," she said, failing to catch my ear.

I clapped my hands. "Is it that grapes are sour?"

Apa smiled and resting her chin on her bosom looked archly at me. Her lower jaw looked fleshy and her neck thick and short. I blinked and looked away as if my uneasiness was

trying to find an escape route. God is my witness I had never seen such a bewitching expression on her face before.

In our childhood we made a game of walking by the edge of the road, sounding the electric poles or collecting empty cigarette packets or kicking at stones or any other object that came in our way. Or standing on our heels against the telegraph poles we would apply our ears to the pole to listen to the humming sound. Once when I stood there with my ear glued to the pole Mohsin struck against the pole with his stick, sending shock waves through my ear. I had a similar experience this time when Sallo cast her bewitching glance at me. But I lacked words to define this unique experience.

“Now speak!” In an unguarded moment Sallo Apa had caught my ear. “Should I pull it out?” She gave me a mischievous smile.

Though she was only gently holding my ear I flinched, pretending that I was in great pain and then struggled to push away her hand. As I did so my hand slipped and fell under her arm, making me hold on to her. I remembered nothing after that brief brush against her body.

In childhood we used to celebrate the Holi festival with great enthusiasm. It never occurred to us that this festival was not meant for us. We would prepare bucketfuls of coloured water and more than pouring it over others we enjoyed the mixing of its colours in buckets of water. We would swirl the water in the bucket till a depression formed in the middle from which a bubble rose, and went round and round.

I felt as if Sallo Apa had formed a similar coloured circle inside me which was swiftly revolving throwing up a bubble.

I looked at Apa. She was still holding my ear with her left hand while I was holding her left arm, her shoulder almost bent over my shoulder and the odour of her body trailing between us. Holding my breath I tightened my hold over her arm. “Should I twist it?” I said.

Apa looked at me as if vanquished. “Let go of my arm,” she said struggling to release her arm from my hold.

“No, I won’t” I said excitedly. “I’m going to pull it out of your shoulder.”

“*Hai Allah!* you’re killing me!” she cried still struggling.

“Should I pull it out?” I said tightening my hold, as if I

had not heard her protest. Her lips contorted in pain. "Leave me alone!" she cried in mock anger.

"No, I won't," I said.

"So you won't?"

"No."

"Look, Babban." Apa said breathing hard and raising her finger in admonishment. "I'm telling you!"

"Trying to threaten me?" I laughed. "But your threat won't work!" This time I gripped her arm more firmly. Her left shoulder sagged and drooped forward. Her lips twisted as she closed her eyes. And then raising her head she mumbled something. But I was beside myself, devoid of hearing and incapable of speech.

I saw that her face had reddened, her eyes had closed and her hand had gone limp. She covered her face with her hands and bent forward. Her torso curved like a bow and came so close to my knees that I could feel her body warmth and then a soft unfamiliar fleshy touch. It came with the suddenness of a flash of lightning, almost bowling me over.

I felt my head burning under her arm and pulled it away, utterly confused as to what was happening between us. Bewildered, I put my hand on the nape of Apa's neck.

She was still sitting there, hiding her head in my lap.

"Apa Sallo!" I said.

Apa did not reply. I called her again but she did not raise her head nor made any reply. I sat there looking utterly foolish and swallowing hard, my throat feeling parched as if it was lined with nettles.

At last when she raised her head from my lap she did not look at me. I did not have the courage to speak to her and quietly went out of her house.

That night I kept tossing in bed for a long time. Apa's image had often come to my mind but this time I was seeing her from a new angle. She would plant herself before me and I would avert my face, unable to meet her glance. Even if I looked at her I would feel guilty as if someone had caught me watching her naked.

In fact I had fallen in my own eyes. But in a day or two this sense of shame gradually started decreasing and ultimately completely vanished like a volatile piece of camphor eva-

porating in the air. After that if any such feeling lingered in my mind it immediately slipped away like a drop of water from a glazed earthen pot. I would keep thinking of Apa all the time till it became such an obsession that I felt like revolting against it.

Ultimately, things came to such a pass that I wanted to have her before my eyes all the time. If there was any good news I wanted to share it with her. If I wore nice clothes I wanted her to see me in them and tell me if she approved of my choice. It seemed I had no existence of my own apart from her. It appeared the morning dawned so that I should be by Apa's side and the evening came so that I should hasten away from my friends, throw away my books and rush off to Apa's house.

When Mohsin was living with the family I often skipped visiting him but now I visited their house without fail, every morning and evening.

"Apa, you must have made particular note of it," one day I said to Sallo Apa.

"Noted what?"

"That I visit your house more often than I should."

Her eyebrows went up and she laughed. "But what's there to notice in it?" she said.

"Of course, there is." I felt as if I was trying to probe her, for my voice shook a little. "When Mohsin was here I didn't visit your house so frequently."

"Maybe, maybe, but I've never kept count. Tell me, why have you suddenly started making such reckonings?"

"There's nothing sudden about it, Apa." I fell silent, groping for words to explain myself.

The fact was that my eagerness to visit Apa had in no way diminished. Only my vague sense of guilt had held me back. I felt that the members of her family who used to receive me with a smile had now perceptibly cooled down towards me. For instance, Aunt who previously used to beam at me now turned a blank face at me without even throwing a perfunctory, "Please sit down," in my direction. She would just remain engrossed in her work.

"What are you busy with, Aunt?" I would ask just out of politeness although I could see what she was doing.

"Nothing," Aunt would say in a listless tone. "It's the daily grind, what else?"

If Apa was around I would give her a smile or I would just sit down by Aunt's side putting on a silly smile and trying to draw her into conversation even though I could see that she was not interested. In fact I talked with Aunt just to cover up my eagerness to meet Apa.

In the beginning I used to go direct to Apa's room but soon I realised from Aunt's demeanour that she did not approve of it and I changed this practice for I did not want them to get away with the impression that I was only interested in Apa.

"Aunt, where's Apa?" I would ask after some time.

"Where can she go? Must be in her room. God knows what she does there. I find her cooped up in her room all the twenty-four hours. I'm tired of this girl."

Much as I wanted to know why she was fed up with Apa I always desisted from asking her. I feared that by doing so I would be exposing myself. I would with a nonchalant air proceed towards Apa's room though in my heart of hearts I knew that the best course for me would be to move towards the exit instead. Why hang around when you were not welcome? I should have known that it was people like me who were shunned.

But as soon as I decided to leave, Apa herself or her image would shackle my feet. I would enter her room telling myself that I was doing so for the last time—that I would not come here tomorrow. But that tomorrow did not come for months.

"Is it one of those off schedule meetings?" Apa said, as if gathering past threads. "You must have been keeping count."

"Has Aunt ever said anything?" I asked, evading her question.

"About what?"

"About my coming to you?"

"What could she say? You tell me, what do you suppose she would say?"

"You're not trying to understand me, Apa," I said testily. "What I mean to ask is does she mind my coming here, that I keep sitting with you for hours."

"Babban, what rot are you talking?" Apa gave me a surprised look. "Why should Amma mind it? On the contrary she feels pleased when you come. You make her forget Mohsin. You remember, of course, when Mohsin was here she used to send word through him, asking you to visit us."

I fell silent. I had no heart to tell her that things were different then. In the first place I was too young at that time. And secondly the circumstances had changed since then. And if Apa had asked me in what way the circumstances had changed I would not have been able to explain. If like her, one feigns ignorance its quite a job to handle the situation. One can do nothing about it.

"You've become wiser beyond your years," Apa smiled and stood up.

"In what way?" I asked her.

Instead of answering me Apa proceeded to the corner of the room where she had nailed pegs in the wall to hang her clothes from. Her *garara*, *kurta*, blouses and saris were already hanging from them. As she proceeded to take down some clothes for washing all the clothes fell down together in a heap, adding to her work.

"Oh, hell!" Apa said, angrily and sat stiffly down on the floor. "If you don't mind. may I ask you one thing." She scrutinised my face. "All right, I'll leave it for some other time," she said, making a mental somersault.

"But why not now?" I asked.

"Oh, it's nothing," Apa smiled. "There's no point in talking about silly things."

Her remark only whetted my curiosity.

"No, no, you must tell me, even if it is something silly." I said. But the more I insisted the more evasive she became.

"I'll tell you some other time," she at last said with an air of finality.

Then realising that I had started sulking she tried to humour me. "You must not take interest in idle gossip," she said. "I'll give you some good news. Yesterday Zaibun visited us. She was with me for a long time. She was remembering you."

It made me laugh. "Apa, do you think I'm a child?" I said. "What's there to gloat over it—that Zaibun was remembering me?"

"But why not?" Apa gave me an intense look. "It's how you feel about it. It is evident that nobody remembers some body without some reason. She was asking about you again and again."

Her words had no meaning for me. More than her words it was her twinkling eyes and the thin line of mischief lingering over her lips that revealed everything to me. I felt as if I had been stripped of my clothes, making me naked. I averted my face in order to hide my embarrassment. Then I heard Apa's soft laughter. But even then I refused to look into her eyes. It was very much like Apa. One moment she was talking in a matter of fact way and then she would suddenly start behaving mysteriously.

"I hardly ever understand what you women talk." I gave a hollow laugh. "Only a woman can understand another woman."

Knocking her knees against each other Apa got up with a jerk. "If you don't understand me I had better drop the matter at that. Have you heard from Mohsin since he left?"

"No."

"We have heard from him only once," Apa said. "He wrote that the place was not bad and he had no trouble about his food. Only he was not feeling upto the mark. Some times he felt really miserable. Amma snapped up the letter and retired to a corner to read it. She kept weeping over it for a long time. The same day Amma made me write to him. If he was unwell he must come home immediately, she asked me to write. Life was not worth living without health."

"Is he coming home?"

"Oh no" Apa replied. "As if anyone cares for Amma. Abba says that even if his bones are reduced to powder he will not allow him to enter his house. Mohsin has invited it all upon himself."

Before Apa could move from the place or I could comment upon what she had said, two more clothes fell from the peg and a pair of trousers which had been hanging on the peg hidden from sight fell on top of the heap of clothes.

Apa turned sharply and looked at the pants and then at me and proceeded to hang it back on the peg.

A thought flashed in my mind. Didn't I recognise the pants? Had I ever seen Mohsin wearing them? It was too short for Uncle and I presumed that Mohsin had taken all his clothes with him. Still, tantalisingly enough, the pants looked familiar to me.

Suddenly like the crackle of a burning log a memory flashed in my mind and I squirmed. Yes, now I remembered it. At the last Muharram the youngman whom I had seen smoking a cigarette and hovering around Apa was also wearing a similar chocolate colour pants. It was the colour of the pants Apa was wearing on the evening she paid us her surprise visit.

"I hope you are not joking," Sallo Apa laughed and stretching out her hands pushed the blanket to the other end of the bed. She was sitting in her bed and I on its edge. As she stretched out her legs to smooth out the blanket a gust of wind bearing her body warmth from under the blanket brushed my knee and filled the room.

"Can I ever dare to joke with you?" I said.

"Of course, you can," Apa replied. "You are doing this to tease me. Have you told Amma?"

"No, I'm coming straight to your room. Apa, believe me. And if you don't believe me you go straight to my house and verify it from my people there. We shall be leaving this place in a week's time."

She looked at me in disbelief and then looked out of the window. "It's to the good," she said. "I'll also follow you soon after."

"Where will you be going?"

"Where are you people going?"

"We are going to Dantewara. Abba is being transferred to that place."

"Then I'll also go to Dantewara." Apa smiled. "Surely, I can visit you there, can't I?"

"Of course, you can," I heartily approved of her suggestion even though I was feeling a bit disappointed. Her reaction to my news was utterly contrary to my expectation. She had taken the news rather casually as if it concerned some other person.

Last night when Abba broke the news to us it had cast a

pall of gloom over the whole family. Abba listlessly lay down on his bed. He had not only been transferred to a rather unpopular place but he had also been penalised by a reduction from his monthly salary, by ten rupees. We sat silent as if our lips had been sealed. It was a blow to Amma's prestige and to all that she had possessed.

If the transfer had taken place a few months earlier I would not have felt sorry over it. Such government transfers provided a welcome opportunity to see new places. I felt jealous of my companions whose fathers were transferred from place to place at short intervals. And now that a similar opportunity had come our way it only gave me a jolt. I would be saying good bye to Jagdalpur. Oh, I would really miss Sallo Apa. "Babban, are you really going?" she would ask.

Sleep seemed to elude me. I kept thinking over it as I lay in bed. The first thing in the morning, I rushed to Sallo's house. She was still asleep. I woke her up and broke the news to her without prelude.

Previously I had only thrown a feeler and now I was stating a fact. As before, she took the news calmly as if it concerned somebody else. I was hurt. "Apa, aren't you sorry that we shall be gone?" I asked her at last.

"But you are not going for good? You'll of course be coming back?"

"Yes, we shall come back."

"Then what's there to feel sorry about? Only I shall feel bad for a day or two." she paused for a moment to remove the blanket from her body and then added: "Babban, do you mind sitting here for a while? I shall be back in a minute."

Outside the window, the winter sunlight was sprawling over the ground, pale and soft like the *bhalkatya* flower. The neighbours were sitting outside their houses, basking in the sun. There was a flurry of morning activity in every house, big and small.

"Nobody will know what a wrench it has given my heart," I said to myself when Apa was gone. "They are all unconcerned about me, lost in themselves, none feeling for the others."

I suddenly realised that I was alone in Apa's room. It was so quiet—not even the sound of a footstep glanced at her

unmade bed and then looked around the room. I thought of lying down in Apa's bed and laughed at myself. What a childish thought! I picked up her pillow and dug my nose into it. It smelled of Apa's hair.

I heard footsteps and lifted the pillow to put it aside. As I did so a piece of paper fell down from under the pillow case. Should I pick up the piece of paper or let it lie there? The footsteps passed by the door without stopping. I felt ashamed of my timidity. What was wrong in placing the pillow in my lap? What was I trying to hide and from whom?

I picked up the piece of paper from the floor and after running my eyes over the first two or three lines put the paper in my pocket and waited for Apa's return.

Good, that the paper had fallen into my hands. Suddenly it had removed the blinkers from my eyes, revealing Apa in her true colours. Maybe, otherwise I wouldn't have gone away from Jagdalpur with an easy mind.

As our preparation to leave went underway I laughed at myself for behaving with the impetuosity of a child at the thought of leaving Jagdalpur. I was specially thinking of Apa. My heart would sink at the thought of parting with her. But when the moment of parting came it seemed to have lost its sting and later on I laughed at my weakness.

It was quite an ordeal to settle down in a new place. I passed my first few days at Dantewara with great difficulty. I often thought of Sallo Apa, especially the evenings hung heavy on me even though this change had broken the monotony of my earlier mode of life.

The Shankhani, cutting its way through rocky terrain, flowed to the north, not far from our house; the distance was not more than a hundred yards. As I lay in bed in the stillness of the night the presence of the river seemed even more real as it flowed hurtling against the rocks, creating a crashing sound. We had only to open the door of the backyard and climb down about twenty-five steps to reach a big saucer-shaped maidan which was known to be a haunt of frogs. We would walk across the maidan to reach the river Shankhani—dry, sandy and desolate, small bamboo groves flanking its banks. A bridge spanning the river linked Dantewara with Bastar.

Dantewara was a tehsil, a single road running through the

small town and a few lanes forming its outskirts. It was known for the Beladeela peak, rising above a range of low hills and visible from all angles when not lost in fog. Besides a forest of shaal trees one could see tall, gaunt palms swaying in the breeze day and night.

It had become a daily ritual with me to sit outside my house and look at the palm fronds in front of our house. In the afternoon when the entire locality looked desolate and empty the stray noise of a cloth being beaten on the rocks of the Shankhani would break in through the stillness. From behind the *keora* bushes crickets would trill ceaselessly, creating needle-sharp sounds and far off one could hear the 'chhap-chapak' of a fisherman as he cast his net over the bosom of the river while the breeze blew fitfully over it as if it was casting backward glances. The palms stood proudly tall and erect, their leaves shivering in the breeze. The breeze seemed to be blowing eternally.

It was one such afternoon when Abba rushed home, looking utterly distraught. As was my habit, I was reclining in an easy chair in the verandah watching the palm trees. The wind had risen and I feared some coconuts may come down crashing from the trees. In the past few years there had been some fatal accidents and now people stayed clear of the palm trees for fear of the fruits falling upon their heads.

I saw Abba entering the house in bare feet, his face looking drained. He was holding an envelope in his hand and quickly disappeared into the house without exchanging a word with me. My heart pounding hard, I followed him into the house.

Amma was sitting in the middle room. "Look!" Abba cried. "See, what's happened."

"What's happened?" Amma's face turned white as she looked at Abba's harassed face.

Abba held the letter before her and blurted out, "Sallo is dead!"

"What?"

"Yes, Sallo is dead," Abba repeated in a colourless voice and kept staring at the letter. We stood before him stock still, Amma on one side of him and I on the other. "How did it happen?" Amma asked.

"I don't know. The letter does not say anything. She was all right when we left."

I don't remember anything else. But of all my memories of Dantewara this one is still very vivid in my mind as if it had happened only yesterday.

I tried hard, tapped all possible sources but I could learn nothing more about Sallo Apa's death. Not at that time, not even now after a lapse of so many years when Apa's body must have mouldered in the grave. I have even left the Babban of those years behind and today I am sitting here like a stranger to recite her *fateha*.

"Aunt!" I said in a thick voice wiping my face. "See how time flies. It is difficult to believe that ten years have passed since Apa's death."

Aunt made no reply. She only removed the plate and changed the *rotis*. Then she sighed and her eyes filled with tears.

How Sallo Apa died is still a mystery to me. She was not ill, nor had she met with an accident. Her death was so sudden and unexpected. Whenever her name comes up her people just lower their heads and Aunt starts looking the other way. I have a feeling that something unsavoury had happened which all of them were trying to hide from me.

Three days after the arrival of that fateful letter I heard Abba and Amma talking among themselves at night.

"Yes, I had been suspecting it all among," Amma said.

"Suspecting what?"

"That one day Sallo would come to a sad end. Once I had even thrown a hint to Junior Aunt to keep a watch over the girl. But she paid no heed to my advice. I couldn't tell her in so many words, could I?"

"Yes, what more could you do? We are living so far away from them. Maybe she had caught some disease."

"No, no, a young girl like her does not fall an easy prey to disease. But I had heard some stories about her while we were in Jagdalpur. She had gone wayward. I really did not approve of her ways and that was one reason I did not like Babban to visit them too often. But the fellow had burrowed himself into their house and was there all the time. I've myself seen..."

"Sh...sh, not so loud," Abba interrupted Amma, "Maybe the children are still awake. And you know even walls have ears."

I turned on my side. All the events of the past seemed to have arrayed themselves before my eyes...Sallo Apa's coming to my house in male attire, cigarettes, chocolate-colour trousers and a piece of paper falling down from within her pillow-case. The letter was so outrageous that one could not have read it out to others. Was Apa's untimely death the climax of all this?

I kept wondering how Apa would have felt in her last moments. One day she had told me: "Babban Bhaiyya, I'm not afraid of dying. I'm only afraid of the grave."

"But why the grave?"

"Haven't you ever seen a dug-out grave? They put the body in such a small place. It must be so dark inside after they have covered it with earth. And then those worms, snakes and scorpions! Hai Allah, I hate being buried. It is far better to burn one's body after death or place it in an open place for kites and vultures to peck on."

"But a dead body is devoid of any feelings or sensation. It does not make any difference what one does with a dead body."

"Who knows," Apa said gloomily in an unconvincing tone. Yes, who knows what happens to a dead body? Maybe the soul feels tortured and the dead body is unable to show the soul's agony. Nobody has ever returned after death to tell his experiences. Besides, it is said that no sooner are the mourners forty yards away from the dead body through angels descend from heaven with lashes. The sinners are singled out to be lashed and tortured. May Allah have mercy on them."

Forgetting all hate, anger and acrimony I prayed to God for Apa's redemption.

O, the horror of it! Really would angels have descended into Apa's grave holding lashes in their hands?

AFTER Roshan Uncle's death the family started disintegrating; the moment he closed his eyes the family's standing went. It was said that Mohsin had to come away without completing his studies and after much running about he managed to get a petty job that helped to keep himself going. I saw him after a long interval of seven years. It was not the same Mohsin whom I seen off at the bus stop on his way to Kondagaun.

One afternoon I was returning from the post office after sending a registered letter when I spotted Mohsin near the bridge. It was not easy to recognise him after so many years. But the cast of his face was unforgettable and in spite of his physical appearance having undergone many changes I managed to

recognise him. "Mohsin!" I called out to him in a hearty voice.

Mohsin feigned not to have heard me. Perhaps he wanted to avoid me. Then he stopped and gazed at me with unseeing eyes.

"Don't you know me?" I extended my hand towards him. "I'm Babban."

"I've recognised you all right." Mohsin took my hand. "When did you come?"

"A couple of days back," I replied in a firm voice. "But I did not see you around."

"Where did you look for me? At home? On the road?" He laughed. I realised my mistake. I had not called at Uncle's house since coming here. "Anyway, you don't look the same Babban," he said. "Have you completed your education?"

"Yes."

"That's good. You must have been posted as an officer in some Government Department. Which Department is it?"

"Stop pulling my leg," I laughed mirthlessly. "I'm just fresh from college. It is not easy to get a job soon after leaving college."

"But why not? There are people who land a job while still studying. Sometimes jobs wait for them."

"I'm not one of those lucky people. I've just started sending out applications. Maybe one day I'll have luck."

"Where have you started from? Must be aiming at a Deputy Collector's post. That is as it should be. They all start with that. After completing college education every one aspires for a three-hundred rupee job. You also do the same. There's nothing wrong about it."

To tell the truth, his remark hurt. A strange man indeed. He was meeting me after so many years and he had straight-away tried to make me the butt of his ridicule.

"How goes the world with you, Mohsin?" I asked, in order to change the subject. "You must have got a job."

"Who? Me?" he laughed. "I did manage to get a job but I lost it. And now I roam about on the roads."

"How's Aunt?"

"She's all right," he said emphasising the word all right. "What could go wrong with her?"

"And Rubina?" I also wanted to ask about Sallo Apa but I caught myself in time. Why had I forgotten that she was no more in this world?

"She too is well."

"Any offer of marriage for her?"

"I don't know anything about it," he said carelessly as if he was amused at my question. "You must have heard that I'm married."

"Yes, I know."

"You must have also heard how the marriage took place. And about my child. I know you couldn't attend my marriage. You were busy with your studies. If you had been here you would have seen with what pomp the marriage was performed. And what a marriage party! Some of my married friends joked that they would not mind marrying a second time if they could be feted like that."

Mohsin guffawed. "Oh, yes an interesting thing happened of which you are perhaps not aware," he had some difficulty in holding back his laughter. "Amma had gone to a rich family of Raipur, asking for their girl's hand for me. It was all settled. But when the marriage party went there they refused at the most crucial moment. They said that the boy was not even a Matric and had a teacher's job in a primary school. So they had had second thought on the matter and had changed their mind. Their girl spent much more than his salary on her saris alone. How could he maintain their girl on his meagre salary? Amma felt as humiliated as if her nose had been chopped off. We had taken the marriage party to Raipur with such eclat and it would be a terrible disgrace to return to Jagdalpur without the bride. Amma saved her face by quickly looking up a few girls on the spot, selected one of them and clinched the matter there and then. When the marriage party returned home and they glimpsed the bride's face they all started whispering among themselves. I was aghast when I looked at her face. "Amma, couldn't you find any other girl for me in the whole of Raipur?" You know what Amma said in reply? 'Son, I had gone blind,' she said beating her forehead. 'Some people took undue advantage of the situation and foisted this girl on us. They outright cheated me. They showed me one girl and dumped some other girl on us. I came to know when it was too late to do anything about it.

At the time of parting the girl's mother clung to my neck and said, 'Sister, forgive me if I've done something wrong. I'm entrusting my only daughter to you. She's harmless as a cow. How could I know that she was thrusting a buffalo upon me in the name of a cow? You may curse me, you may abuse me. I don't deny that the fault is mine.'

Mohsin started laughing. "I could not pull up Amma for it, could I? I said, 'Amma, there's no point in crying over it. Whether a cow or a buffalo, you have got a daughter-in-law and have gained the status of a mother-in-law. What more do you want?' Did I say anything wrong?"

Mohsin looked at me for confirmation but I had no heart to look him in the face.

"Is Bhabi with you here?" I asked.

"Yes, where else could she go? I'll have to beat the drum that has been tied round my neck."

"Don't say that," I said trying to console him. "A wife is like one's rib. One has to live with the woman which destiny has thrown to one's lot. Try as one may one cannot change one's destiny."

"I didn't say that fate had no hand in it. I'm not complaining. I'm just giving you a glimpse of my fate. I'm in a tight spot. I've no peace of mind. The dice is always loaded against me "

"But why did you leave your job?"

"What else could I do?" Mohsin replied in a harsh voice. "It's better to leave with grace than to be kicked out. You haven't been on a job yet and have therefore no idea of the vicissitudes of life. When you come here you will learn the hard way that one cannot hold a job just through hard work and with brains. There are other qualities that matter far more and I lack them."

"Why, has some injustice been done to you?"

"No, it's nothing of the sort. I gave up my job before some such thing could happen. Those who hold your destiny are the type of people that you wouldn't even care to look in the face. You remember, Naidu Bhaiyya had once told us about a man who had come to meet him under cover of the night for fear of losing his job."

"Yes, I do remember."

"There has been a deluge of such men after the 15th of August, 1947. Good that you were not here on that day. Otherwise you would have suffered from mental anguish like me. Every honest and well-meaning man either laughs at them or beats his head in despair. Tell me, isn't it lamentable that when it was the time to make sacrifices those who had basked under false prestige or had held nice jobs under the government are today wearing Gandhi caps and are called patriots. They are the ones who today decide our fates. They are having the best of both worlds."

I saw that Mohsin's face had become grim and distorted. Due to his poor health he looked uglier still.

"Here man has no value." Mohsin gritted his teeth. "Here they have no respect for man. The more dishonest a man the higher his position. An honest man meets Naidu's fate. People don't even remember him."

We had come to the Moti Talab, Mohsin having taken it in his stride. The smell of rotting fish rising from the tank filled the air.

Talking of honesty, I was reminded of Mishra and Patel, both of whom had been my classfellows. Mishra had left his studies half way and had got the job of a Sales Tax Inspector. Patel had, however seen his studies through and after doing his M.A. had landed a clerk's job.

"Mohsin," my eyes roved over the dirty bank of the Talab, "were you present at Naidu's last moments?"

"No, I wasn't there when he died. But would it have served any purpose. You know in the end he had even failed to recognise me."

Naidu had a widowed sister. He had come to Jagdalpur leaving her behind. As long as his financial means permitted he kept supporting his sister and her son. But towards the end of his life when his financial condition became weak he stopped sending money. He had felt terribly bad about it and would even shed tears over it. "Indira Behan, I'm your worst enemy but you must forgive me. I was shortsighted, not to have foreseen its consequences."

What was behind his coming to such a sad end? Was it due to his failure in life? Or was it that he had come to a wrong

place where life had lost its meaning? From the very start till the very end he had led the life of a recluse.

"It's the same story everywhere," Mohsin had said. "Where people win glory as martyrs just by sprinkling some blood over their bodies people like Naidu have no chance. May I tell you one thing?"

The skin over Mohsin's face was so thin and taut that when he laughed or showed anger, his jaws almost protruded which always startled me.

"Yes, tell me, what's it?" I eagerly looked at his mask-like face. I knew he was getting worked up with some tormenting thought.

"That my life is nothing but a pack of follies. I used to be so reckless, always full of childish pranks as if I was the one to set the river on fire. But now it makes me laugh when I think of it. Huh, how silly of me. I had made a bid to change the course of the world!"

Mohsin gave a hideous laugh. Suddenly a gust of wind loaded with stench blew across the tank. On the opposite bank I could see discoloured shells clinging to the rank withered grass. We stopped under the shade of a tree to rest for a while.

"Don't be surprised if I say that I no longer swear by love for my country," Mohsin said, peacefully settling down on the grass under the tree. "I'm tied to this place because of Amma. If I could have had my way I would have left this place long ago."

"Where would you have gone?" I laughed to take the edge off severity of his remark. "Where could you run away to?"

"Why, to the same place to which Ejaz, Rafiq, Ghani and Ashfaq have migrated."

"You mean to Pakistan?" I looked at him incredulously.

"Yes, precisely. So you know." Mohsin nodded. "If you take my advice you must also follow them there. Babban, you are wasting your time here. All of you will keep sitting on the fence, belonging nowhere. A man like you can make a success of his life there. You know Ashfaq. He was a teacher in the primary school. If he had stayed here even in seven lives he would not have seen his sons making good in life. They would have just rotted here. There his eldest son has gone to *Vilayat*.

The second son has got a good job with the Airlines and the third. . .”

I did not hear what Mohsin said next, as if my faculties were concentrated in recognising who he was. Was it the same Mohsin who in spite of being the son of a government official had taken a plunge into the freedom movement? The same Mohsin who had stood by Naidu in his darkest moments?

“I know,” Mohsin said. “You think I’m talking rot or that what I’m saying has a communal tinge. But if you go deep into it you will readily appreciate the veracity of what I am saying. Aren’t we living here under a delusion? And what you call nationalism or patriotism—isn’t it another name for helplessness?”

I started laughing. “Mohsin, it’s now that you are talking like a real rebel. It’s good that nobody is within earshot. It’s such thoughts that bring a bad name to the whole community. Listening to you, one would come to believe that miracles happen there.”

I recalled the early days of 1948 when many people from our town including our own relatives had migrated to Pakistan. Rafiq said that he was going to Orissa whereas he had actually gone to Pakistan. Ghani overnight changed his Hindu dress while the school teacher Ashfaq duped us by saying that he was only going to meet his sons. They had asked Abba also but he refused to go. When people tried to persuade him by telling him on which side his bread was buttered he said that he preferred to die here, rather than make a mess of his life in old age.

And then came the time when our people were wholesale regarded as suspects. School boys, as their eyes landed on us, would cry, “Pack them off to Pakistan! Tie them to the tail of Jinnah!” It made me cry. Why did people suspect us? Was it our fault that we were born in a Muslim family?

“The worst is yet to come.” Mohsin said looking into the distance. A bird had taken off from the edge of the tank and was flying towards us.

“You are still having rosy dreams. But the time is not far when you will see your dreams shattered and you will form the habit of carrying your wrecked life on the back of those shattered dreams. By then your parents would have gone senile or they would be dead.”

The bird flew down and perched on an overhanging branch of the tree under which we were sitting.

As it is, every picture has two sides to it. But it seemed that Mohsin had seen only one side of the picture. While talking of school teacher Ashfaq he had forgotten that his eighty year old mother had stayed behind because her other sons were still here. Her hair had turned grey and flaxen but she was still hovering between two worlds like a spider. She could not leave this world nor enter the other world.

I got up from under the shade and said, "If you have really made up your mind to migrate, there is time enough. You can bury your mother and then go. But on landing in Pakistan if you feel that you have been cheated where will you go? Arabia or Iran?"

Mohsin cast a puzzled look at me. He was on the point of making some remark but refrained.

The bird sitting on the branch of the tree fluttered its wings and twittered loudly. It seemed that the bird was on a long flight and had just stopped to snatch some rest during its long voyage.

I took leave of Mohsin with a heavy heart. I could not forget that meeting for many days. When alone, the premonitory image of the bird would haunt my mind and the sound of its fluttering wings would keep me from sleeping.

The hinges of the outer door creaked and someone entered to the clap of chappals.

"Who's there?" Startled, Junior Aunt raised her head from her knees and peered into the dark.

No reply came. But the sound of the chappals became louder as someone proceeded towards Bhabi's room

"Is it you, Mohsin?" Aunt asked again resting her head back on her knees. I looked in the direction from which the sound was coming. Sensing my feeling, Aunt said, "He won't come, Bhaiyya"

"Why?"

"He knows best." Aunt's voice seemed to have splintered with dejection. "I've told you. Although he lives under the same roof I don't see him for weeks together. He goes out while it is still dark and returns so late at night that I do not even know that he is in. My own children hate to look at my face."

"Aunt, he doesn't meet others either," I tried to console her. "Since his return I've met him only once."

"Where did you meet him?"

"On the road, I won't call it a meeting. I just waylaid him. After that I did not meet him again. I'm not even aware of where he goes and what he does."

"Did he say anything about me?" Aunt asked in a faltering voice. And then without waiting for my answer added, "Let him say what he likes. Only God will hear me. Do you know he is waiting for me to die? That's what he is waiting for. So that. . ."

Her voice became strained. She bit her lower lip and turned away her face. Then she heaved a deep sigh. "Never mind" she said. She couldn't say anything more.

"Allah!" I heard Bhabi's thick voice. It sounded so overcome. A flap of the front door rattled in the strong breeze and then banged shut.

Suddenly my neck twitched. As I turned my head to scratch it I felt as if it was Sallo Apa standing behind the curtain. Had they tried to keep me in the dark about her existence? A moment's delay on my part and she might have disappear from my sight for ever.

Many years have passed but still I cannot believe that Sallo Apa is dead. Oh, no, she couldn't die while still so young and full of life! There must be a conspiracy against her. They must have hidden her somewhere or secretly sent her away to some unknown place. Now, as then, her death has remained a mystery to me; everything has been so nebulous about it.

In later years I have felt the same hush-hush among others that I had seen between Abba and Amma that night at Dantewara. But nobody had cared to be explicit, as a result of which I could never come to any definite conclusion. The only thing that I was definite about was that there was a story behind Sallo Apa's death and her people preferred to be evasive about it.

"How did it happen, *bhai*?" I ask the neighbours. "It was so sudden." But they would refuse to be drawn out.

"There's nothing sudden or too soon or too late about death," they explained to me. "One may be talking to you one

moment and drop dead the next moment. What do you say to that?"

"There must be some immediate cause," I said testily. "Even death finds an excuse. It could be a cold, cough, fever, heart attack, an accident or some such cause."

"Nothing of the sort happened in her case," they replied. "She vomitted at night and died in the morning. She did not even give them time to call the doctor."

"What kind of vomitting? If her condition was so bad why wan't a doctor called immediately?"

"We wish we could tell you, bhai," the neighbour replied. "Only her own people can enlighten you on that point. We were not present there. And besides, it was their personal affair. It is said that the girl kept screaming the whole night, asking for a doctor. But nobody paid any heed to her. They called the doctor only in the morning just to keep up appearance. But it was too late by then. Even now people insinuate that there was something fishy about the whole affair."

"What do you mean?"

"We don't know. We had not seen anything ourselves. But those who saw say that the girl's entrails came out bit by bit with the vomit."

"Bhaiyya, is the *fateha* over?" Aunt raised her head from her knees and looked at me. Sallo Apa's *fateha* had come to an end quite a while ago. I pushed away the *rotis* that had been set apart in her name and intently looked at Junior Aunt whose life lay bare before me. Had I made a mistake in understanding her? Why did she look so unfamiliar and detached where Sallo Apa was concerned? Was I suffering from a sense of guilt that I couldn't openly ask her about Apa? Was I still the same timid, hesitant and spineless Babban of yester year?

"Is the list complete?" Aunt asked.

"Yes."

"Are you sure no one has been left out?"

I shook my head and pushed the list towards her.

"Add one more name." Aunt filled one more plate and pushed it towards me. "It's for the anonymous straggler. The unknown one who may come unannounced."

How thoughtful of her! Along with other souls she had also taken care of an unknown forgotten soul. But tonight which unknown soul would unknowingly stray to this door? It was futile to ask Aunt such a question.

The lamp was gradually getting dim and dimmer still the night. It seemed to be sighing.

"What's the time?" Aunt looked out.

"Eleven."

"It's always happening like that," she said. "For the past several years the *fateha* is always getting delayed. Now how will I distribute the 'shares' so late at night? Rubina, put some kerosene in the lantern."

Rubina had fallen asleep where she had been sitting. When she did not wake up after repeated calling, Aunt herself got up grumbling and going into the inner room, searched for a canister of kerosene in the dark. She was still groping in the dark when the wick of the lantern burnt down plunging the room in darkness. She had not been able to locate the tin of kerosene and had to make do with a small tin lamp in place of the extinguished lantern.

In the wavering light of the tin lamp Aunt edged closer to me and said in a thick voice, "I had better burn some *loban* (benzoin)".

As Aunt sat in that dim light, her hands raised before her face in a sense of dedication and self-abnegation I felt that her prayer was just an excuse to hide her face from herself.

Coming out of that semi-dark house I lingered outside for a while. The stillness of the night, except for the barking of a few stray dogs was evenly spread over Aunt's house, the tank and the entire locality which was dozing fitfully in its first sleep.

The *fateha* had tired me. I wanted to have a breath of fresh air. But the whole atmosphere was full of the stink of rotting fish and black water.